THE Nation.

IS THE PARTY OVER?

McCAIN SELLS OUT VETS
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THE GOP CRACKUP
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Letters

Reverend Wright & the UCC

Elkhart Lake, Wis.
Thanks for Eudora Smith's "The Liberation of Reverend Wright" [May 5]. So, there is an echo of the biblical prophetic tradition that remains in the church in America after all! Most of us know precious little about the black church and its rhetorical traditions. The miserable performance of the media covering the snippets from Jeremiah Wright's sermons reveals their utter ignorance of such traditions, which have sustained millions. Wright stands in a long line of great African-American preachers who have not only read the prophets but had the courage to emulate them.
Frederick Trost

Cincinnati
In Eudora Smith's praiseworthy article, her brief passage on the roots of the United Church of Christ doesn't mention the counterpart to the Congregational Church of the Pilgrims and Puritans, namely the Evangelical and Reformed Churches, with their contrasting geographical and ethnic makeup, the latter including many German and Hungarian Americans. The black members of the UCC are part of a denomination that includes a broad range of other members. Since the UCC is receiving a good bit of attention because of Barack Obama, it needs to be presented in broader terms.
Lloyd C. Engelbrecht

Banished

Huntsville, Ala.
As a 1948 refugee from Palestine, I have had a keen interest in writings by progressive Jewish Americans on the Palestine/Israel peace process. Henry Siegman's excellent moral criticism of Israel's occupation and its treatment of Palestinians in "Tough Love for Israel" [May 5] takes a sharp turn when he refers to the events leading to the establishment of Israel in 1948, which he describes as a "noble Jewish national liberation struggle." Surely Siegman is aware of Ilan Pappe's *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, which documents the execution of a plan, conceived and perfected by early Zionists, to dispossess and expel the bulk of the Arab population by acts that included well-documented massacres.

Because the United States and other Western countries glorified Israel's 1947–48 enterprise, extreme Israelis know they can rely on similar justification of their current policy. This was vividly demonstrated by Prime Minister Menachem Begin, addressing the Knesset on May 2, 1982, criticizing a view that settlements outside the Green Line be stopped: "Settlement [within the Green Line] in areas populated by Arabs… was it moral or immoral?… If that decision is moral, then settlement near Nablus is moral." Logically, the reverse would also be true. This point is not lost on Siegman, who writes: "Time and again, this history has shown that the less opposition Israel encounters from its friends in the West for its dispossession of the Palestinians, the more uncompromising its behavior."
Anis B. Salib

Campus Watch, SPME vs. Alterman

Philadelphia
Eric Alterman mischaracterizes Campus Watch in his May 5 "The Liberal Media" column, implying that we worked with Paula Stern to deny tenure to Nadia Abu El-Haj. He is wrong on two counts: first, Campus Watch never coordinated our work with Stern. We operate independently of any external party, be it Stern or David Horowitz. Second, we do not take positions on tenure questions. We insist on our right to critique professors at any stage of their careers, but we did not call for the denial of tenure to Abu El-Haj.

Alterman also charges that Campus Watch "offers its kosher seal of approval for ideologically kosher academics while attacking all others." In fact, Campus Watch has no litmus test for professors. We critique for analytical failures, politicized scholarship, intolerance of alternate views and abuse of power over students.
Winfield Myers, *director, Campus Watch*

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Burma's Desperate Hour

The catastrophe unfolding in Burma may have been precipitated by an act of nature, but its root causes and current dimensions are man-made. In the wake of Cyclone Nargis, the military junta that rules the country has made a series of reprehensible decisions, bringing death, disease and destruction to a people it is entrusted to protect. As we go to press, the UN estimates that up to 102,000 Burmese have perished; some 220,000 are missing; and close to 2.5 million are in dire need of clean water, shelter, food and medical treatment. Yet, fearful of an alliance between pro-democracy forces and foreigners, the Myanmar regime initially rebuffed offers of assistance and so far has allowed in only a trickle of emergency supplies and almost no relief workers. Much of the aid that has gotten through has been confiscated by the military and distributed to its members or sold on the black market, and the government has even blocked some of its citizens from distributing rice.

EDITORIAL

Tragically, long before the storm, the people of Burma were enduring a humanitarian disaster brought about by political means. Since 1962 successive military regimes have dismantled Burma's once enviable healthcare system—today the state spends just 3 percent of its budget on healthcare while devoting 40 percent to its armed forces. The result: Burma's health sector ranks 190 out of 191 nations; it has one of the highest TB rates in the world; and a third of its children are chronically malnourished. Moreover, as part of a recent crackdown, the junta imposed rigid travel restrictions on aid workers, forcing the Global Fund to Fight AIDS and Médecins Sans Frontières to withdraw from the country. Other groups, like the International Red Cross, were ordered to close field offices.

The acute nature of the crisis and the regime's intransigence and corruption create an agonizing humanitarian dilemma. Students and an association of Burmese monks, as well as the National League for Democracy, the party of imprisoned Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, have called on foreign governments to intervene immediately—without the consent of the junta, with or without UN authorization. Humanitarian intervention in Burma may be justified by the Responsibility to Protect doctrine, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2005, which obliges the international community to step in when a state can't or won't protect its people from crimes against humanity. Efforts to put the matter before the Security Council have been stymied by China, patrons of the junta, but the United States has yet to put its full diplomatic weight behind a resolution. It should do so now. The specter of UN action might cause the junta to relent; and a resolution would at least force Chinese officials, ahead of the Beijing Olympics and on the heels of the devastating Sichuan earthquake, to rebuke the Myanmar regime or vote publicly to deny lifesaving aid.

Absent UN authorization, the United States and other countries should initiate airdrops of rations, although it's a flawed compromise that can't provide aid workers or medical treatment. A coalition of nations including the United States, preferably led by regional states, could also act independently—but that should be considered only after every UN option has been exhausted. Any kind of intervention, UN-led or not, risks retaliation from the junta, which could endanger aid distribution. To guard against this and to distinguish this intervention from case like Iraq that used humanitarianism as a fig leaf, any relief efforts should be strictly confined to providing aid in the delta region. The Burmese are looking to the skies and shores for help. It is politics—not nature—that imperils them now.

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Why is Hillary losing?

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Obama's GOP Base

Rush Limbaugh and some myopic Democrats would have us believe that most if not all Republicans who have been voting in Democratic primaries are "dittoheads" implementing the radio host's "Operation Chaos." Limbaugh has promoted his scheme for months, encouraging GOP listeners to re-register and vote in Democratic contests for the presumably weaker candidate, Hillary Clinton. As the Democratic campaign dragged on, the radio ranter's initiative became an obsession among Obama backers, who didn't care to acknowledge Clinton's lingering appeal among their fellow partisans. John Kerry, who's still bitter over hits he took from the right during his 2004 presidential run, has championed the chaos concept, especially since Obama came within a whisker of upsetting Clinton in Indiana's May 6 primary. "If it hadn't been for Republicans taking Democratic ballots, he likely would have won in Indiana," Kerry declared, echoing conventional wisdom.

COMMENT

Kerry's wrong. The "Limbaugh effect" did not tip Indiana to Clinton. Republicans accounted for 10 percent of the state's Democratic primary voters. Roughly 130,000 of them took Democratic ballots, and exit polls say they split 54 to 46 percent for Clinton. That puts her crossover advantage at around 10,000 votes, less than her winning margin. Even if we assume all Indiana GOP crossovers voted for Clinton with chaotic intent—a dubious assertion, considering her demonstrated cross-party appeal among older women—they did not contribute enough extra votes to account for her narrow victory.

Far more significant than Limbaugh's gambit is the fact that Obama attracted tens of thousands of sincere Republican crossovers in Indiana, continuing a trend that has been evident from the start of the Democratic race. Since January—when Republicans who caucused in Iowa as Democrats told pollsters they favored Obama four to one over Clinton—the Illinois senator has been the steadiest beneficiary of GOP crossover votes. That was particularly true in the primaries of states where the presidency is likely to be won or lost this fall. In Missouri, where Obama narrowly beat Clinton on February 5, his strength among Republicans who took Democratic ballots—they favored him 75 to 21—can reasonably be said to have given him the win. In Virginia a week later, Republicans favored Obama 72 to 23. And in Wisconsin his crossover advantage was 72 to 28. Even in Ohio, where Limbaugh pressed his "chaos" campaign aggressively, exit pollsters found that as many Republicans backed Obama as Clinton.

Are these "Obamicans" conservatives who see the Illinois senator as a fellow traveler? There's little evidence of that. Prominent Republicans who have endorsed Obama sound themes I've heard from crossover voters in numerous states. Former Senator Lincoln Chafee says Obama is "the best candidate…to restore our confidence to be moral and just, and to bring people together to solve the complex issues such as the economy, the environment and global stability." Recalling her grandfather's concerns about a military-industrial complex, Susan Eisenhower says Obama is best prepared to address the fact that "we are disliked overseas and feel insecure at home…[that] our federal budget hemorrhages red ink and our civil liberties are eroded."

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Noted.

CLINTONOMICS: Asked May 4 by **George Stephanopoulos** to name a single economist who supports her proposed gas tax holiday, **Hillary Clinton** responded, "I'm not going to put my lot in with economists," as if "economist" were a four-letter word. Economists may have had the last laugh, since voters in Indiana were largely unconvinced by her plan. Clinton had a point, though, not about the gas tax but about the undue influence of a certain brand of mainstream economists who dominate prestigious universities—and who also dominated much of **Bill Clinton**'s Administration.

It was these mainstream economists who wholeheartedly supported NAFTA with as few restrictions as possible. They insisted that cutting the budget deficit was the nation's highest economic priority, even as the government generated enormous budget surpluses by the late 1990s. Instead of investing those surpluses in transportation, education or healthcare, Clinton passed them on to **George W. Bush** to scatter among the rich. Following the hardy advice of mainstream economists, Clinton fully deregulated the financial industry. We got Enron and today's credit crisis partly as a result. His mainstream economists encouraged the flow of hot capital internationally, contributing mightily to the late-'90s international financial crises.

Hillary Clinton may well be a critic of some of these economic policies now, but she also apparently thinks the economists she knows—the ones who had her husband's ear—represent the totality of solid and relevant economic thought. In fact, many good economists have different views on trade and fiscal policies and cannot get a hearing. Mainstream economists and public policy analysts have produced very good research on the financial payoff from government investment in infrastructure and pre-K education. Some respected mainstream and many progressive economists have shown that high taxes and big government are not impediments to prosperity and may often contribute to it through sensible and needed social programs. Many economists have made intelligent, well-documented cases for the return of financial regulation. But these arguments go mostly unheeded.

In terms of integrity and capability, however, Bill Clinton's mainstream economists towered over Ronald Reagan's advisers, who had but one thing to say: cut taxes. That's what's distressing about Hillary Clinton's remarks. She actually sided with Reagan's heirs, like former Congressman **Dick Armey**, who holds a PhD in economics and who ridicules the intellectual abilities of those who disagree with the notion that tax cuts always lead to more growth. The mainstreamers, we should remember, made their contributions, chiefly beating back the nonsense proffered by Reagan's supply-side tax cutters.

But don't get too optimistic. The Democrats' persistent focus on government spending and the evils of budget deficits is damaging to the nation and to their own capacity to deliver what they promise voters. It would have been refreshing if Hillary Clinton had taken on these central economic precepts. The lesson is not to discard economists. It is to fight bad economics with better economics. Congress, Senator Clinton and Senator **Barack Obama** have to reach out for a broader set of views. They are there for the taking. JEFF MADRICK

THE RON PAUL REVOLT: Democrats still have to figure out how to seat the disputed delegations of Michigan and Florida at the national convention this August in Denver. But the Republicans may have to deal with even uglier wrangling over credentials when they meet in St. Paul the following week, and the challenges posed by supporters of Texas Congressman **Ron Paul** could yet throw the GOP's gathering into disarray. Fervent backers of Paul, the antiwar libertarian who has refused to endorse **John McCain**, have already created chaos in Nevada, and they're threatening to do so in more states—including Georgia, Minnesota and Washington—where the process of naming delegates has yet to be completed. After 600 Paul backers packed the Republican delegate-selection session in Nevada on April 26, things got so heated that state party officials suspended the process. What's Paul's endgame? He and his followers hope to force the Republican convention to take up issues like withdrawal from Iraq, restoring civil liberties and shutting down the Federal Reserve. That has scared McCain's team enough that they are rushing to block Paul's state-based revolts. If they fail to block the inspired Paulites, it could be the Republicans, not the increasingly harmonious Democrats, who hold the summer's more tumultuous convention. JOHN NICHOLS

SUPERDELEGATE SCOREBOARD: **Hillary Clinton**'s advantage among superdelegates was once thought to be insurmountable. Following the Iowa caucuses, she boasted 100 more superdelegate endorsements than **Barack Obama**. That advantage has evaporated. Following his big win in North Carolina and narrow defeat in Indiana, Obama now has more superdelegate endorsements than Clinton. Since May 6, he has picked up roughly thirty, opening up a double-digit lead. Yet a number of superdelegates still have not made their preferences public. According to my count, more than 80 percent of the 200 or so remaining "uncommitted" superdelegates hail from states that have already held a primary or caucus. These people presumably voted as well. They know who they're supporting; they're just not telling the rest of us.

So who are the remaining fence-sitters? More than half are members of the Democratic National Committee or state party chairs, like California state party chair **Art Torres**, Ohio Democratic Party chair **Chris Redfern** and Democratic activist **Christine Pelosi** (who, like her mother, Nancy, has urged superdelegates to back whichever candidate wins the majority of pledged delegates). Nearly ninety are members of Congress or governors, such as Virginia Senator **Jim Webb** (a possible VP pick), Ohio Senator **Sherrod Brown**, Representative **Rahm Emanuel** and Montana Governor **Brian Schweitzer**. Two are from Guam. And six are "distinguished party leaders," most notably **Jimmy Carter** and **Al Gore**. ARI BERMAN

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Obama has consistently been portrayed in most media as more liberal than Clinton, but he has won crossover votes not by triangulating or presenting himself as some kind of DLC "New Democrat." Rather, he has preached diplomacy, social tolerance and racial reconciliation—themes familiar to old-school moderates and the Rockefeller Republicans so derided by current GOP leaders. That's something the Obama camp should take to heart as it plots fall campaign strategy. Republican crossover voting has been a constant in the Democratic race. While Limbaugh's intervention may have boosted Clinton's GOP numbers at the end, hundreds of thousands of Republicans have been casting enthusiastic ballots for Obama. They have done so in particularly high numbers in some of what will be the fall's most competitive swing states: Missouri, Wisconsin and Virginia. If they do so again in November, crossover Republicans could be essential members of a winning Democratic coalition. JOHN NICHOLS

McCain Sells Out Vets

The way John McCain tells it, the injuries he suffered at the hands of his captors in Vietnam would have ended his career as a Navy pilot were it not for the help of physical therapist Diane Rauch. And that's basically true: after months of painful treatment, he was well enough to pass his medical screening. But that leaves out an interesting part of the story. In his biography of McCain, Robert Timberg details the treatment McCain received at two naval hospitals. Navy doctors in Maryland were, in fact, McCain's first physical therapists, but they offered a bleak prognosis. Fortunately for McCain, the story of his imprisonment and torture was so widely known that strangers from across the country offered assistance. One of those strangers was Rauch, who provided her services at no charge.

COMMENT

As a vignette, it's charming—a POW, just released from a long and brutal stretch in captivity, finally stumbling upon some good fortune. But it's hardly a working model for veterans' health services. Most vets, after all, need government-provided treatment for the rest of their lives—first, like McCain, at military hospitals and then, unlike McCain, at VA facilities.

Thirty-five years after McCain's return to the United States, the Veterans Health Administration has undergone a sea change. Once a national embarrassment, it is now among the highest-functioning public bureaucracies. In fact, it's the best health system, public or private, in the country. (Military hospitals are a different story altogether, managed not by the Veterans Administration but by the armed services. To many, the words "military hospital" evoke images of the Soviet-style decay uncovered by journalists at Walter Reed Army Medical Center.)

Times have changed since McCain needed veterans services so urgently. And for many of those thirty-five years, McCain, the presumptive GOP presidential nominee, the candidate who talks the best talk on veterans issues, has demonstrated a tendency to work against veterans' interests, voting time after time against funding and in favor of privatizing services—in other words, of rolling back the VA's improvements by supporting some of the same policies that wrecked Walter Reed.

During a March 2005 Senate budget debate, McCain voted to kill an amendment that would have "increase[d] veterans medical care by $2.8 billion in 2006." That amendment lacked an assured funding stream, but lest one mistake this incident for a maverick's stance against budget-busting, there's more. Just a year later McCain voted against an amendment that would have "increase[d] Veterans medical services funding by $1.5 billion in FY 2007 to be paid for by closing corporate tax loopholes." Two days after it failed, he voted to kill "an assured stream of funding for veterans' health care that [would] take into account the annual changes in the veterans' population and inflation to be paid for by restoring the pre-2001 top rate for income over $1 million, closing corporate tax loopholes and delaying tax cuts for the wealthy." That amendment died quietly, forty-six to fifty-four.

In September 2006 McCain voted to table an amendment to a Defense appropriations bill that would have prevented the department from contracting out support services at Walter Reed. The amendment was indeed tabled—by a vote of fifty to forty-eight, the sort of margin a true veterans' senator might have been able to flip if he really cared about veterans' healthcare.

"John McCain voted against veterans in 2004, '05, '06 and '07," says Jeffrey David Cox, who spent twenty-two years as a VA nurse before moving to the American Federation of Government Employees, where he serves as secretary-treasurer (AFGE represents employees of several federal agencies, including the VA). Cox is right. Under Bush, McCain has voted for measures that target so-called Priority-7 and Priority-8 veterans (those whose injuries are not service-related and whose incomes are above a low minimum threshold) for annual fees, higher co-pays and even suspended enrollment. Priority-7 veterans without dependents earn more than $24,644 annually. Priority-8 veterans without dependents earn an annual minimum of $27,790.

Cox and AFGE are also concerned about McCain's pet plan to issue all veterans a "plastic card," which they could take "to the doctor or the provider of their choice and…get the treatment they need."

"We should give them freedom to choose to carry their VA dollars to a provider that gives them the timely care at high quality and in the best location," McCain has said. AFGE sees it as a backdoor attempt to undermine, or even destroy, the VA. According to Phillip Longman, a senior fellow at the New America Foundation and an expert on the VA, such ideas aren't always inappropriate (disclosure: in 2006 I worked at NAF, where I provided research assistance to Longman and others). Private services, he says, can in some cases be essential to veterans in underserved communities. "But his idea shows just how un-

Calvin Trillin, Deadline Poet

Competitive Sliming

Hamas is for Barack, so said McCain.
Old John, Barack replied, must be confused.
McCain, though, showed his sharpness in a way:
He found a slur the Clintons hadn't used.

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informed [McCain] is about veterans and the VA. Veterans who are already in the system don't want to get out," Longman says. "Every veteran who moves from the VA system into the private system will find it more dangerous and more costly." And there are additional concerns. AFGE points to incidents like the ones in Hayward and Rice Lake, Wisconsin. Last summer veterans facilities in those cities outsourced the operation of their clinics to a private firm, Corporate Health & Wellness. Within a few months the company, citing major financial losses, jumped ship, leaving veterans in search of care locked out for weeks.

Cox adds that the privatization of other, nontreatment services—laundry and janitorial, for instance—aren't without costs of their own. Approximately 80 percent of VA jobs—and therefore an enormous percentage of the jobs that are outsourced to private firms—are (or were) held by veterans themselves.

These are the natural consequences of policies McCain and the Republican Party have supported. Despite the recent onslaught from the right, though, and despite the many incidents in which GOP cronyism has resulted in veterans' suffering, the VA is still providing the best care in the country. "It's endured seven years of hostile treatment from the Bush Administration, and it's still standing…it's still a bright star," says Longman. "I think the VA could probably withstand a McCain administration." But could it? If recent trends continue—outsourcing in particular—they could eventually erode the elements most crucial to the VA's success, and at the deadly expense of its quality of care. In November the Department of Veterans Affairs announced it would begin using the Cerner Corporation's proprietary laboratory information system "in more than 150 hospitals and 800 clinics in the Veterans Health Administration system" for the next nine years, ousting an open-source information system that was developed by VA programmers years ago. That system, VistA, has outperformed every comparable privately developed system on the market. It helped transform the VA from the country's most scandal-ridden health provider into its finest, and has become the envy of treatment facilities around the world.

In other words, VistA is critical to the VA's ability to provide quality care. In bringing an outsourcing culture into the VA, Longman says, Bush appointees are "destroying the open-source culture that turned the VA into what it is." Based on McCain's record, there's little reason to believe that as President he would stanch that bleeding. And that could portend a disaster for veterans—one that makes the problems McCain and the GOP have already created pale in comparison. BRIAN BEUTLER

Brian Beutler is the Washington correspondent for The Media Consortium.

Bring Back Antitrust!

Microsoft's recent effort to ensnare Yahoo!—fended off in part by a cooperative venture between Yahoo! and its competitor Google—raises important but overlooked questions: What happened to antitrust? Can competitors today combine at will? Would Microsoft, whose grip on the desktop computer remains unshaken after a decade of antitrust litigation and court-ordered relief, have been allowed to acquire control of a new portal so that Internet users might remain in its thrall?

COMMENT

The answer to the "What happened to antitrust?" question lies in the echo of a similar one posed by historian Richard Hofstadter more than forty years ago: "What happened to the antitrust movement?" He pointed out that the political impulses animating antitrust in its first half-century faded as the United States became comfortable with big business. The last great antitrust crusader with political visibility, Thurman Arnold, turned antitrust over to postwar enforcers, who transformed it into a technical exercise managed by lawyers and economists. Hofstadter wrote, "Once the United States had an antitrust movement without antitrust prosecutions; in our time there have been antitrust prosecutions without an antitrust movement."

We now appear to have reached a time when we have neither an antitrust movement nor antitrust prosecutions. We have dropped "movement" from the question. It's "What happened to antitrust?"

One thing that happened is that we have taken too seriously Hofstadter's view that antitrust had become a technical exercise, divorced from political concerns. This is not so. The technical economic analysis that rightly underpins antitrust often provides contested solutions to questions of business behavior and market structure, not clear-cut "truth" on which everyone can agree. Something other than technical analysis is thus needed to make decisions. And the choice of the core concepts on which to focus antitrust enforcement is the product of political values, not technical decisions. Do we care about the distribution of wealth? About maintaining opportunities for entrepreneurs to challenge entrenched monopoly firms? Or do we just want to allow companies the mostly unfettered ability to operate "efficiently"?

Anyone who thinks antitrust is solely a technical exercise should look at what the Bush Administration has done to enforcement. Bookending this period is the Microsoft monopolization litigation. Brought in 1998 by the Clinton Justice Department, twenty states and the District of Columbia, the litigation demonstrated Microsoft's wide-ranging effort to suppress challenges to the dominance of its Windows operating system, in which it choked off new entrants and controlled the pace and direction of innovation in desktop computing. The remedy was to be a restructuring of Microsoft into two companies, each with market incentives to compete against the other. With Bush's ascendancy, however, the case was settled with a decree prohibiting certain conduct, but without structural relief.

The Justice Department then went from being Microsoft's prosecutor to being its enabler. It vocally criticized antitrust enforcers in Europe and Korea for pursuing cases against Microsoft that were very much in line with the original Clinton Administration prosecution. Most recently, Justice refused to join state plaintiffs in asking for an extension of key provisions of the settlement decree, an extension the district court judge granted on the ground that the entire decree needed to continue if it were to achieve its goals. Apparently, the department is no longer concerned about achieving those goals.

But the Microsoft litigation only provides the bookends. In between we have seen a general vanishing of Justice Department civil antitrust litigation. Bush Administration officials have given speeches expressing a definite hands-off attitude toward monopolists, and their enforcement record reflects that view: they have brought just one monopolization case since taking office. In

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seven years Justice has brought only fourteen civil cases involving agreements in restraint of trade. It has brought forty-four merger cases, but compare that with forty-one cases filed by the Clinton Justice Department in just the two years before the Bush Administration walked in the door. Symptomatic is the department's recent approval of the merger-to-monopoly of XM and Sirius, the only providers of satellite radio. The department reasoned that consumers could just switch on their iPods if the new monopolist raises the subscription price and that, who knows, "within several years" the next generation of wireless networks will likely be able to stream radio programming to our phones in our cars, which would take care of the XM-Sirius monopoly.

If politics is "What happened to antitrust?," politics can happen again. By this I don't mean just a change of administration in Washington but a change in public values. In antitrust, as in many other areas involving economic regulation, there is a general perception today that businesses have slipped the traces of public control and that unregulated market forces will not ensure a just, or even efficient, economy. It is time to push the reset button, time to reassert the legitimacy of public intervention.

The reset needs to be broader than the Justice Department, of course. Conservative judges have made it more difficult for antitrust litigants to win when they do bring cases. The Supreme Court has relentlessly closed its doors to antitrust plaintiffs—ten straight wins for antitrust defendants in the past four terms. Even Justice and the Federal Trade Commission are finding lower courts markedly unreceptive when they attempt to litigate.

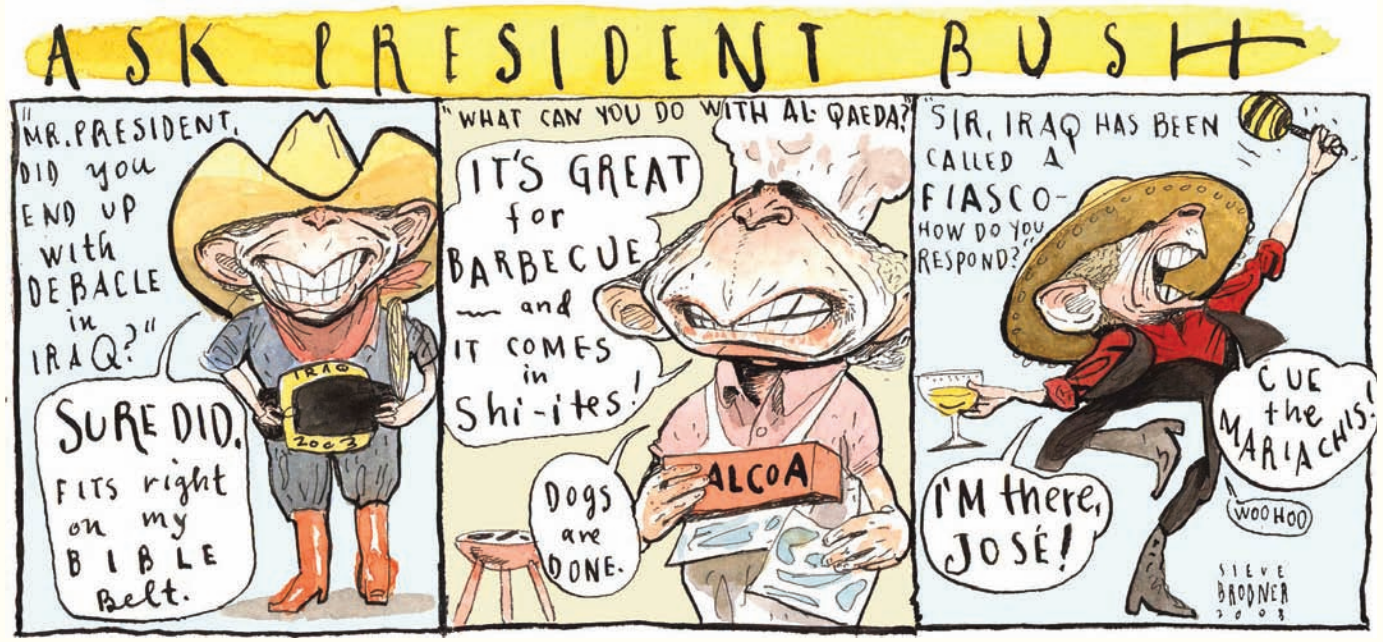
What might an antitrust reset look like? There are three important changes in direction that would help consumers and the economy. First, federal antitrust enforcers need to change their hands-off approach to agreements between manufacturers and distributors that can make it harder for discounters to compete through lower prices. If ever there was a time to be concerned about the buying power of people who need low prices, not expensive brand-name retailing, this is it. Think Wal-Mart. Think the Internet. Antitrust should make sure that less efficient retail distributors can't pressure manufacturers to set high "suggested retail prices" and then force discounters to follow. Second, antitrust enforcers need to cast a more skeptical eye toward mergers. Having fewer competitors in markets that are already concentrated increases the chances of higher prices and decreases consumer options. Think airlines, where mergers are being proposed for the very purpose of raising fares and reducing available flights. This benefits competitors, but not competition and not consumers. Third, antitrust enforcers need to police dominant-firm exclusionary conduct. Much innovation comes from small firms pioneering new technology. Incumbents often want to control the pace of innovation and fear disruption to their businesses. Think MCI, at one time a tiny company whose efforts eventually destroyed the (old) AT&T monopoly. Think Netscape, which saw the possibilities of the Internet before Microsoft did and was effectively destroyed by Microsoft's exclusionary practices.

It will take time to reset antitrust. Meanwhile, we might answer the "What happened to antitrust?" question this way: it is alive and well and living in Europe. In fact, the European Commission is trying to encourage private antitrust litigation in Europe rather than discourage it. Why? According to European Competition Commissioner Neelie Kroes, it is to provide "justice for consumers and businesses, who lose billions of euros each and every year as a result of companies breaking EU antitrust rules." Americans used to think about economic justice. Perhaps soon we will think about it again. HARRY FIRST

Harry First is professor of law at New York University School of Law and director of its Trade Regulation Program.

Comix Nation

by STEVE BRODNER


ASK PRESIDENT BUSH
"MR. PRESIDENT, DID YOU END UP WITH DEBACLE in IRAQ?"
SURE DID. FITS right on my BIBLE Belt.
IRAQ
2003
"WHAT CAN YOU DO WITH AL-QAEDA?"
IT'S GREAT for BARBECUE — and IT COMES in Shi-ites!
Dogs are DONE.
ALCOA
"SIR, IRAQ HAS BEEN CALLED A FIASCO- HOW DO YOU RESPOND?"
I'M there, JOSÉ!
CUE the MARIACHIS!
WOO HOO
STEVE BRODNER 2003

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Eric Alterman

Good Night and Good Luck

One of the oddest aspects of this extremely odd extended primary has been the Clinton campaign's ability to persuade virtually the entire press corps to indulge its fantasies of victory long after they lost any basis in reality. As one unnamed Clinton official admitted recently, "We lost this thing in February." Well, yeah. *Politico*'s Jim Vandettei and Mike Allen pointed out in mid-April, "One big fact has largely been lost in the recent coverage of the Democratic presidential race: Hillary Rodham Clinton has virtually no chance of winning." They cited a Clinton adviser putting her chances of success at 10 percent. Somehow, the punditocracy pretended not to notice.

Of course, it was possible, but hardly plausible, that some combination of events might throw the nomination Clinton's way. Sure, she might have won 70-plus percent of the remaining popular vote. Sure, the superdelegates might decide en masse to ignore the will of voters, insult the party's base among African-Americans and deny the nomination to its first black presidential candidate. Sure, party and elected officials might decide to reject the candidate who has proven able to rejuvenate the party by raising mountains of money on the Internet, appealing to independents and Republicans and exciting young people in a manner unseen since John Kennedy, in favor of one whose negative ratings considerably exceed her positives and who energizes the other side's base as no one else on earth… but, um, why?

The tendency toward faith-based analyses had many causes. Reporters relish conflict, however hypothetical, and fear drawing conclusions. The Clintons control a lot of purse strings. But it can hardly be a coincidence that the punditocracy swung behind the Clintons and against Obama just as her campaign began to rely on the same set of right-wing talking points that Republican presidential campaigns have employed against Democrats since 1968. Obama was too liberal. Obama was too effeminate. Obama was too elitist. Obama could not win the votes of "working, hard-working Americans, white Americans."

It was an amazing turn of events. Recall that in 2006, the late Jerry Falwell opined, "I certainly hope that Hillary is the candidate. Because nothing will energize my [constituency] like Hillary Clinton. If Lucifer ran, he wouldn't." David Keene, head of the American Conservative Union, added, "Hillary is a left-wing Democrat, a collectivist, who is hostile to most of the values we conservatives hold dear."

That was then. But once the nomination began to go Obama's way, the Clintons pivoted right. Hillary harped on Bill Ayers's terrorist past and the Rev. Jeremiah Wright's lunatic statements and told an interviewer that there was no basis for rumors that Obama was a Muslim "as far as I know." Bill Clinton said he looked forward to her victory over Obama so we could have an election between "two people who loved this country and were devoted to the interest of this country." The candidate embraced McCain's intellectually indefensible gas tax holiday and, when questioned about it, repudiated a lifetime of high-minded wonkery by insisting that economists enjoyed no special expertise when it came to economics. Bill Clinton made the ethos of his wife's campaign explicit in Clarksburg, West Virginia, when he announced, "The great divide in this country is not by race or even income, it's by those who think they are better than everyone else and think they should play by a different set of rules." His target was not the corporate elite but a liberal black man raised, like himself, by a lower-middle-class single mother.

Conservatives were quick to capitalize on their latest conversion. *National Review*'s Rich Lowry cooed, "Hillary has shown a Nixonian resilience and she's morphing into Scoop Jackson. She's entering the culture war as a general.… She's fighting the left and she's capturing the center. She's denounced MoveOn.org. She's become the Lieberman of the Democratic party." *The Weekly Standard*'s Noemie Emery purred, "She's running the classic Republican race against her opponent, running on toughness and use-of-force issues, the campaign that the elder George Bush ran against Michael Dukakis, that the younger George Bush waged in 2000 and then again against John Kerry, and that Ronald Reagan—'The Bear in the Forest'—ran against Jimmy Carter and Walter F. Mondale. And she's doing it with much the same symbols." And with Olympic-level chutzpah, *New York Times* neocon William Kristol attacked the "liberal media" for "failing to give Hillary Clinton the respect she deserves."

These two phenomena—the pretend primary and the Clintons' right-wing run at Obama—are hardly unrelated. Clinton was tapping into a powerful ideological strain within the punditocracy, where the default position is pro-war and pro-McCain. Suddenly, Obama's tardiness in denouncing the nutty notions of his friend and pastor was somehow more egregious than her decision to support Bush's war, which has killed hundreds of thousands of people, wasted trillions of dollars and destroyed America's reputation the world over. Indeed, the pundits' refusal to recognize the reality of Obama's victory is reminiscent of their refusal to focus on the obvious deceptions and dissimulations that led to the Iraq catastrophe. Sure, it was always possible that Iraqis would welcome their invaders as liberators, embrace democracy overnight, make peace with Israel and spread liberal humanist values in a region where it has no cultural roots. Pigs *might* fly; you can't prove a negative.

I liked and admired both Clintons before this campaign began and hope to do so again. But right now, all I can say is, "Good night and good luck." The voters weren't buying, and Obama emerged from this ordeal bloodied but unbowed. He stands poised—God willing—to become America's most progressive President in more than half a century. And given the state of the nation after eight years of George W. Bush's malicious (and mendacious) misrule, he damn well better be… ■

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Naomi Klein

Regime-Quakes in Burma and China

When news arrived of the catastrophic earthquake in Sichuan, my mind turned to Zheng Sun Man, an up-and-coming security executive I met on a recent trip to China. Zheng heads Aebell Electrical Technology, a Guangzhou-based company that makes surveillance cameras and public address systems and sells them to the government.

Zheng, a 28-year-old MBA with a text-messaging addiction, was determined to persuade me that his cameras and speakers are not being used against pro-democracy activists or factory organizers. They are for managing natural disasters, Zheng explained, pointing to the freak snowstorms before Lunar New Year. During the crisis, the government "was able to use the feed from the railway cameras to communicate how to deal with the situation and organize an evacuation. We saw how the central government can command from the north emergencies in the south."

Of course, surveillance cameras have other uses too—like helping to make "Most Wanted" posters of Tibetan activists. But Zheng did have a point: nothing terrifies a repressive regime quite like a natural disaster. Authoritarian states rule by fear and by projecting an aura of total control. When they suddenly seem short-staffed, absent or disorganized, their subjects can become dangerously emboldened. It's something to keep in mind as two of the most repressive regimes on the planet—China and Burma—struggle to respond to devastating disasters: the Sichuan earthquake and Cyclone Nargis. In both cases, the disasters have exposed grave political weaknesses within the regimes—and both crises have the potential to ignite levels of public rage that would be difficult to control.

When China is busily building itself up, residents tend to stay quiet about what they all know: developers regularly flout safety codes, while local officials are bribed not to notice. But when China comes tumbling down—including at least eight schools—the truth has a way of escaping. "Look at all the buildings around. They were the same height, but why did the school fall down?" demanded a distraught relative in Juyuan. A mother in Dujiangyan told the *Guardian*, "Chinese officials are too corrupt and bad.... They have money for prostitutes and second wives but they don't have money for our children."

That the Olympic stadiums were built to withstand powerful quakes is suddenly of little comfort. When I was in China, it was hard to find anyone willing to criticize the Olympic spending spree. Now posts on mainstream web portals are calling the torch relay "wasteful" and its continuation in the midst of so much suffering "inhuman."

None of this compares with the rage boiling over in Burma, where cyclone survivors have badly beaten at least one local official, furious at his failure to distribute aid. There have been dozens of reports of the Burmese junta taking credit for supplies sent by foreign countries. It turns out that they have been taking more than credit—in some cases they have been taking the aid. According to a report in *Asia Times*, the regime has been hijacking food shipments and distributing them among its 400,000 soldiers. The reason speaks to the threat the disaster poses to the very existence of the regime. The generals, it seems, are "haunted by an almost pathological fear of a split inside their own ranks...if soldiers are not given priority in aid distribution and are unable to feed themselves, the possibility of mutiny rises." Mark Farmaner, director of Burma Campaign UK, confirms that before the cyclone, the military was already coping with a wave of desertions.

This relatively small-scale theft of food is fortifying the junta for its much larger heist—the one taking place via the constitutional referendum the generals have insisted on holding, come hell and high water. Enticed by high commodity prices, Burma's generals have been gorging off the country's natural abundance, stripping it of gems, timber, rice and oil. As profitable as this arrangement is, junta leader Gen. Than Shwe knows he cannot resist the calls for democracy indefinitely.

Taking a page out of the playbook of Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet, the generals have drafted a Constitution that allows for elections but guarantees that no future government will ever have the power to prosecute them for their crimes or take back their ill-gotten wealth. As Farmaner puts it, after elections the junta leaders "are going to be wearing suits instead of boots." The cyclone, meanwhile, has presented them with one last, vast business opportunity: by blocking aid from reaching the highly fertile Irrawaddy delta, hundreds of thousands of mostly ethnic Karen rice farmers are being sentenced to death. According to Farmaner, "that land can be handed over to the generals' business cronies" (shades of the beachfront land grabs in Sri Lanka and Thailand after the Asian tsunami). This isn't incompetence, or even madness. It's laissez-faire ethnic cleansing.

If the Burmese junta avoids mutiny and achieves these goals, it will be thanks largely to China, which has vigorously blocked all attempts at the United Nations for humanitarian intervention in Burma. Inside China, where the central government is going to great lengths to show itself as compassionate, news of this complicity could prove explosive. Will China's citizens receive this news? They just might. Beijing has, up to now, displayed an awesome determination to censor and monitor all forms of communication. But in the wake of the quake, the notorious "Great Firewall" censoring the Internet is failing badly. Blogs are going wild, and even state reporters are insisting on reporting the news.

This may be the greatest threat that natural disasters pose to repressive regimes. For China's rulers, nothing has been more crucial to maintaining power than the ability to control what people see and hear. If they lose that, neither surveillance cameras nor loudspeakers will be able to help them. ■

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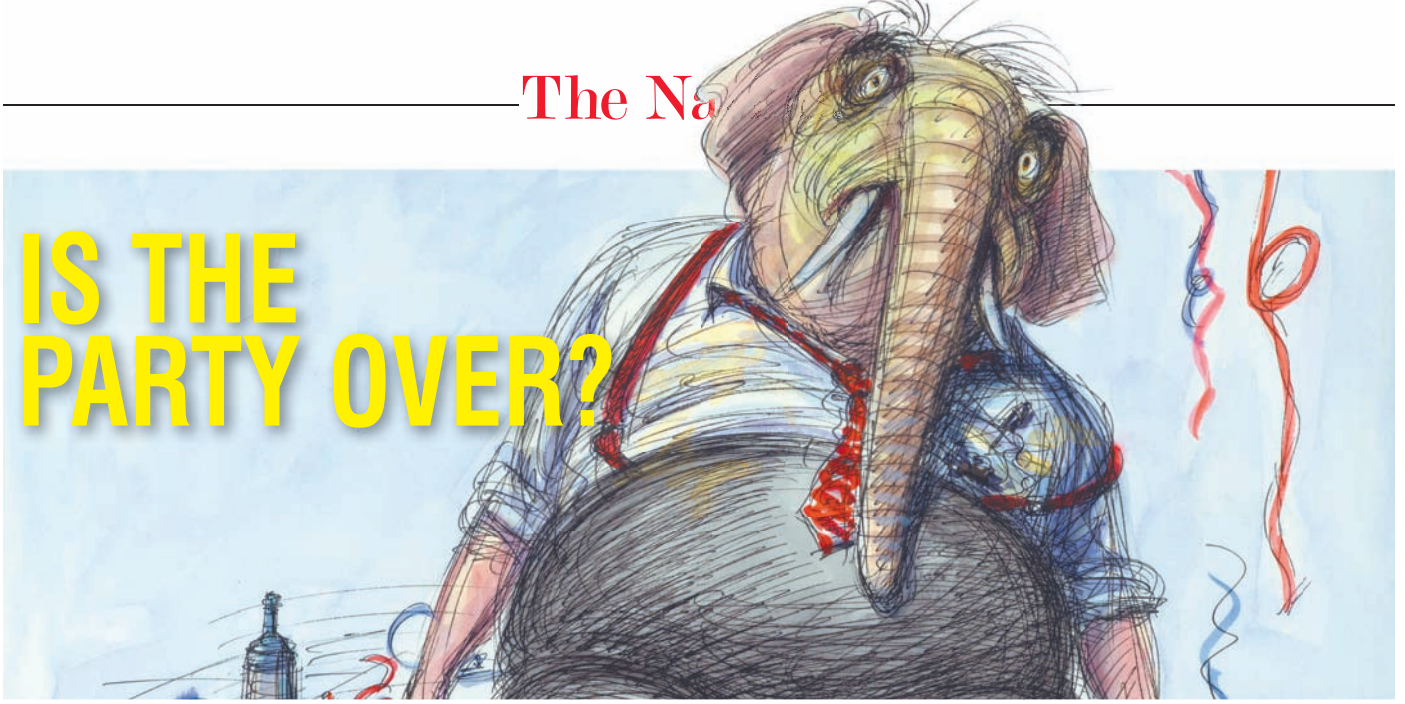

IS THE PARTY OVER?

In the past two years, the GOP's dream of a permanent majority has become a nightmare.

by EYAL PRESS

Two long years ago, veteran political reporter Thomas Edsall published *Building Red America: The New Conservative Coalition and the Drive for Permanent Power*. In the course of several hundred fluidly argued, thoroughly dispiriting pages, Edsall threw a wet blanket on the hopes of Democrats who thought their party stood a fighting chance of wresting power back from Karl Rove & Co. Republicans were more ruthless, more unified and more generously bankrolled by big business, Edsall maintained, in addition to being inordinately savvier. He was, of course, hardly alone in this view. "Republican hegemony in America is now expected to last for years, maybe decades," crooned conservative writer Fred Barnes after the 2004 election. "We are in a tremendous amount of trouble," sighed a glum Democratic chairman in the *New York Times* that same fall.

Although the Democrats may still find a way to lose the election in November, no serious observer would suggest today that it would be because they succumbed to an indomitable foe. Less than a full election cycle after Rove's "permanent majority" was said to be upon us, Bush's approval ratings have sunk to the lowest level of any President since presidential job-approval ratings were introduced. Republicans in Congress are streaming for the exits. Surveys show young voters identifying as Democrats over Republicans by double-digit margins, and the 81 percent of Americans who believe the country is seriously "on the wrong track" have conservatives wondering aloud whether Rove's dream has become a nightmare.

"Without change we could face a catastrophic election this fall," warned former House Speaker Newt Gingrich in a May 6 article on the website of the journal *Human Events*. His prognosis is echoed in several new books written by conservatives that come wrapped in optimistic packaging about how the situation may be righted with the proper adjustments but that are full of gloomy pronouncements about the disaster to come if the same tired formula is pursued. "A generation of young Americans has been lost to our party," worries former Bush speechwriter David Frum in *Comeback: Conservatism That Can Win Again*, the content of which is far less sanguine than the title suggests. "Conservatives have conspicuously failed to earn [Americans'] trust on most domestic policy questions," write journalists Ross Douthat and Reihan Salam in *Grand New Party*, which argues that Bush's plutocratic policies have begun to alienate even many on the right.

The chastened tone of these books is striking in a movement that could scarcely have sounded more sure of itself a few years ago, when the myriad factions of the Republican Party—libertarians, opponents of abortion, champions of big business, neocons—appeared to be marching in lockstep to Karl Rove's tune. Now Republicans are hurling blame at Bush for betraying conservative principles as they search about for scapegoats. "Everyone is sniping at each other," a member of the House Republican Conference recently told *Politico* shortly after the GOP lost a special election in Louisiana's 6th District, a seat it had held since 1975. The defeat came on the heels of a similar setback in March in Illinois, in the district formerly represented by Dennis Hastert. These turnovers, and a widely anticipated special election loss on May 13 in Mississippi, cast a grim shadow over a recent meeting on Capitol Hill where Tom Cole, chair of the National Republican Congressional Committee, warned members there were no resources to "save" incumbents facing well-heeled Democratic challengers.

To some degree, strategic and philosophical tensions among conservatives are nothing new. The priorities of Friedrich von Hayek devotees and James Dobson fans, to say nothing of pro-empire neoconservatives and isolationist paleocons, have never been neatly aligned. In many ways, it's a wonder such disparate groups ever found a home in the same party. Yet every time hopes have risen on the left that the various strands of the conservative coalition might unravel, these hopes have been dashed. The conservative movement that has reshaped the political landscape over the past four decades has proven resilient

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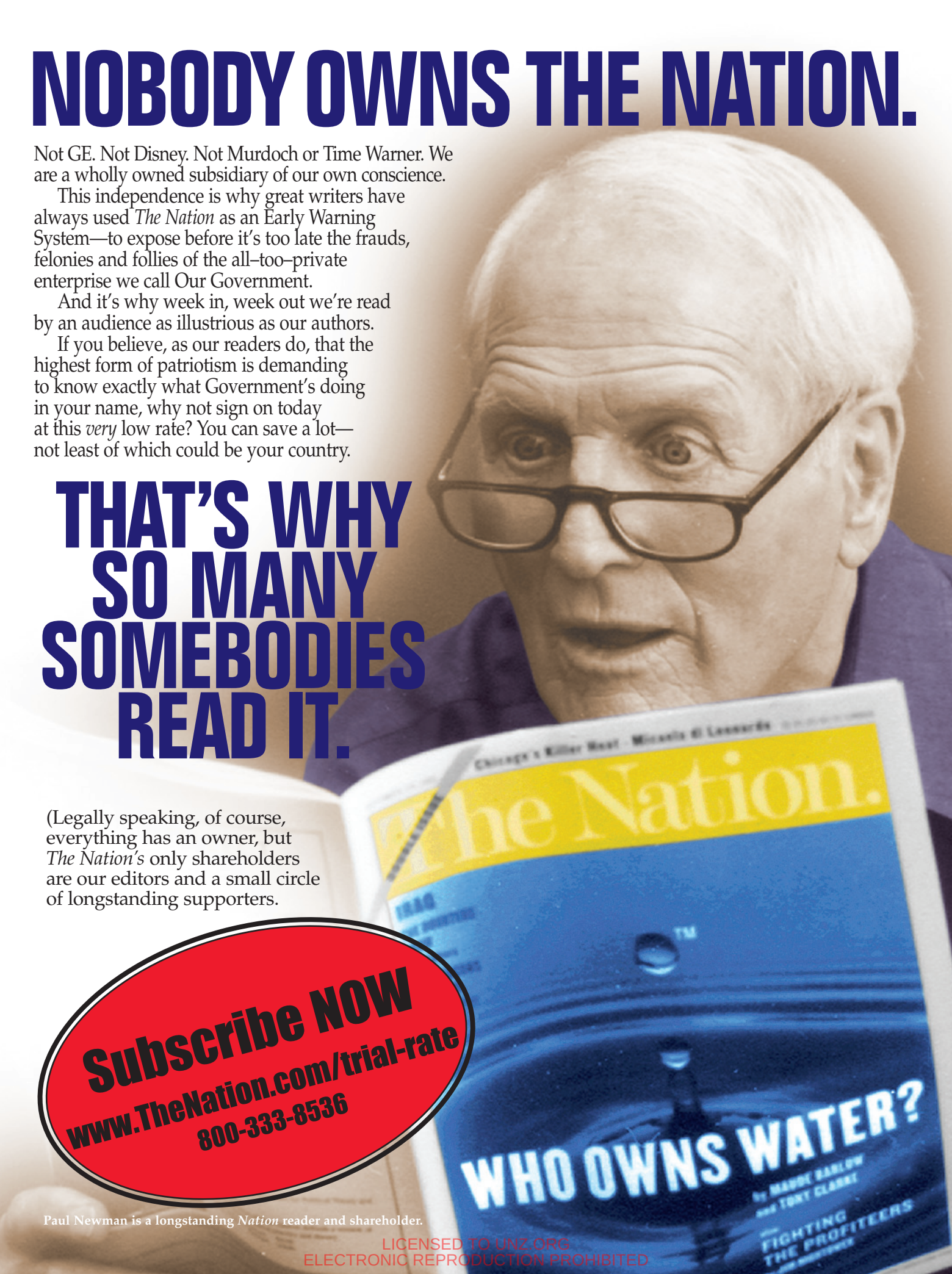

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and enviably adept at pressing forward with an agenda that never seems to moderate. Will now be any different? Will the conservative crackup under Bush come to be seen as a minor detour on the right's steady march to power? Or will it bring an era to a close?

Some who see a lasting realignment under way point to demographic factors, in particular the growing numbers of Hispanics, Asians, professional women and unmarried people who have joined the electorate in recent years and to whom the GOP has done little to endear itself. But while the number of registered Republicans has been falling steadily, more Americans still identify themselves as conservative than liberal. The main problem facing the conservative movement is not demographic. It is doctrinal. It is the problem that confronts any insurgency whose heady idealism comes crashing up against reality once power is seized.

For forty years, the most important trait of conservatives of all stripes has been their unshakable conviction that their vision and their ideas are right. Moral permissiveness, a feckless foreign policy, a welfare-dependent underclass: all the viruses that had infected the body politic under the stewardship of liberals would be cured if only conservatives were given a chance. The right was united above all in its belief that a new Eden would dawn when Americans were liberated from the tyranny of government, whose intrusive hands reached unwarrantedly into every aspect of citizens' lives (save, of course, the bedroom, where those hands were needed to prevent overly liberated citizens from indulging the wrong impulses). When Bill Clinton ended welfare and declared that the era of big government was over, the argument seemed to have been cinched: at long last, even Democrats had come to realize the folly of their ways. But something funny happened on the way to making the revolution complete: when Republicans were finally given the opportunity to free the citizenry from the chains of the Leviathan state, the result was crony capitalism, fiscal recklessness and bumbling incompetence on an unprecedented scale. The opportunity to govern without interference from liberals came, and the consequences—in New Orleans, in Baghdad, in neighborhoods ravaged by housing foreclosures, in levels of inequality unmatched since the Gilded Age—have been calamitous.

Conservatives stunned by this turn of events shouldn't be: it's not exactly shocking that a party committed to the idea that government is the problem did not appoint qualified experts to run agencies like FEMA. Or that a party that views the market as a solution to everything found a way to disburse no-bid contracts to the likes of Halliburton and tax cuts to billionaires in the midst of a war. Yet the idea that Republicans could shrink the bloated government down to size without compromising the national interest—indeed, while enhancing freedom—has proved anything but easy to rebut. Ronald Reagan won landslide victories by promising to get big government off ordinary Americans' backs. Democrats were routinely pilloried as "tax-and-spend liberals" who poured voters' hard-earned savings into outmoded social programs that only exacerbated the problems they promised to solve.

It took Bush's ruinous tenure to illustrate that there are some problems—predatory lending, escalating energy costs, natural disasters—for which the government is a necessary remedy and, perhaps, to persuade less affluent voters to think twice before aligning themselves with the Republican Party against "liberal elites." For several decades, Republicans have succeeded in luring such voters into their ranks not merely by promising to lower their taxes but also by tapping into their cultural anxieties on issues like gay marriage, abortion and guns. A few years ago, one would have been hard-pressed to find a pundit in the country who didn't think this strategy was working. Indeed, the evidence suggested as much: in 2004, for example, white working-class women with annual household incomes between $30,000 and $50,000 backed Republicans by a margin of 60 to 39 percent. Their support helped Bush carry crucial blue-collar states like Ohio. Soon thereafter, *Time* magazine named Bush its Person of the Year.

Conservative analysts warn that the GOP 'isn't just out of touch with the country...it's increasingly out of touch with its own base.'

Two years later, however, this same group of female voters swung to the Democrats, and just like that the GOP majority in Congress was gone. The shift undoubtedly had something to do with growing disenchantment over the war in Iraq. But it's also possible that, at a time when more and more Americans are vulnerable to the dislocations of an increasingly volatile economy, the right's pro-family, antigovernment rhetoric has worn thin. The paradox of championing stability and traditional values, on the one hand, and unfettered capitalism, on the other, is apparently no longer something only liberals find odd. In a cover story in *National Review*, Ramesh Ponnuru and Richard Lowry observed that on domestic issues "it is almost impossible to exaggerate the Democratic advantage" and warned that ignoring the economic anxieties of working-class voters who've been absorbed into the GOP could prove fatal. "We don't have to support 'universal coverage' on health care," they wrote. "But we ought to talk more about health care than about the budget." Douthat and Salam agree, citing a Pew survey conducted in 2005 that divided the electorate into nine discrete categories. Voters in several of the conservative groups expressed criticism of big business and support for more government involvement to address the economic risks facing families, even if this required paying higher taxes. On domestic issues, they conclude, the Republican Party "isn't just out of touch with the country as a whole; it's increasingly out of touch with its own base."

If these analysts are right, the GOP may be in far greater trouble than even they fear, because the solution they recommend—serious measures to address the insecurity facing the working class—is unlikely to come from a party increasingly wedded to the interests of the ultra-privileged. At one point in

Eyal Press is a Nation *contributing writer.*

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Grand New Party, Douthat and Salam propose wage subsidies for low-income workers. It's a nice idea but not one likely to be greeted with great enthusiasm in a party that has consistently blocked efforts to raise the minimum wage while carving out tax loopholes for hedge fund managers. The same goes for broadening access to affordable healthcare, which in any serious plan would require vastly expanding the role of government, long a no-no on the right.

There is, in fact, a growing chorus of conservative critics who attribute the Bush Administration's failures not to its reckless tax cuts but to its insufficient fealty to the tenets of free-market orthodoxy. According to this camp, Bush's domestic agenda would have succeeded but for out-of-control domestic spending and the lack of zeal displayed in the drive to privatize Social Security. It's not hard to imagine how this wing of the right will respond to a major healthcare initiative in the years to come—by launching a campaign to sabotage it, as happened in 1993 when the Clinton Administration introduced such a plan.

If the drive to "slay the beast" of the federal government has begun to give even some conservatives pause, so too has the messianic foreign policy Bush and his advisers have so relentlessly pursued since 9/11. The reason, of course, is Iraq, which even the war's most avid supporters concede has done the Republican Party potentially irreparable harm. "Iraq is the great wreck and failure of this presidency, the great enduring shadow on our party," writes David Frum in *Comeback*, words it undoubtedly pained him to pen and that some of his comrades will surely see as coming too late. Frum is the neoconservative widely credited with having coined the phrase "axis of evil" (he actually called it the "axis of hatred"). In 2003 he wrote a *National Review* article titled "Unpatriotic Conservatives" in which he declared that paleoconservatives who did not support the war "have turned their backs on their country. Now we turn our backs on them." And so it is all the more striking to hear Frum announce that conservatives must "turn a new page" in foreign policy. What he means is that they should not feel ashamed to join the diplomacy-adoring appeasers on the left: "We should make clear that we as Republicans and conservatives are ready to go the extra mile on negotiation. Direct talks with Iran? Why not?"

The billions of dollars wasted and thousands of lives ruined by Bush's war may eventually recede from public consciousness; they have already faded from the headlines. But the damage to the right (to say nothing of the damage to the country) may prove lasting all the same, because the "war on terror" was not a cause embraced solely by the band of neoconservatives who brought us the war in Iraq. It was the template for a grand moral struggle that, like the fifty-year battle against the Soviet Union, was supposed to infuse conservatism with a sense of purpose and clarity not witnessed since Reagan rallied the faithful against communism. Several years ago, Joseph Bottum, an editor at *First Things*, wrote "The New Fusionism," an essay in which he explained why Bush's foreign policy had appealed to everyone from social conservatives obsessed with the evils of abortion to neocons preoccupied with the evils of the Taliban (who, on the matter of women's rights, would find much to admire in a journal like *First Things*). What brought them all together was a shared insistence that "there are truths about human life and dignity that must not be compromised."

Now that this impulse has led to disaster, many conservatives are having second thoughts. As the one in six Republicans who cast a vote for Ron Paul in the Pennsylvania primary attest, the streak of isolationism that has long existed on the right appears to be undergoing a resurgence. The skepticism of conservative realists who viewed the war in Iraq with wariness from the start has grown more vocal and pronounced. The raw fear that once persuaded large numbers of soccer moms, professionals and young people to vote for Bush has given way to widespread disgust at a party that has squandered the nation's moral credibility while ignoring equally pressing problems that future generations will have to deal with—the impending meltdown of the planet, for example. A recent poll shows that Democrats hold an eleven-point advantage over Republicans on the question of which party will do a better job on foreign policy, and a staggering 33 percent edge when it comes to restoring America's respect in the world. In the 2006 Congressional election, 18-to-29-year-olds—voters whose political consciousness was forged between 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq—backed Democratic Congressional candidates by a margin of 60 to 38 percent. It is the exact opposite of the trend that took place during the Reagan era, and for conservatives it is a deeply worrisome sign: once formed, the political allegiances of such voters tend to last.

Judgments about the future of American politics often turn out to be wrong, especially when the subject is the fate of conservatism. Defenders of traditional cultural values were supposed to disappear after the 1925 Scopes "monkey" trial. A quarter-century later, Lionel Trilling described liberalism as "not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition" in the United States, a view many postwar intellectuals shared, dismissing the American right as a fringe movement of xenophobic cranks enamored with the likes of Barry Goldwater, whose trouncing in the 1964 election appeared to confirm the marginality of conservative ideas. As it turns out, Goldwater's landslide defeat marked a key moment in modern conservatism's rebirth, ushering in an era of Republican dominance in the formerly Democratic South and fracturing the New Deal coalition that until then had seemed impregnable.

Four decades later, another Arizona Senator, John McCain, clearly senses that the movement Goldwater helped to inspire is in need of a makeover, at least of its image. McCain's carefully choreographed visits to places like Youngstown, Ohio; Inez, Kentucky; and the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans on his recent "It's Time for Action" tour were designed to signal that less privileged Americans will not be invisible to him, as they were to Bush. Then again, voters have witnessed this before—Bush ran as a "compassionate conservative" in 2000. While McCain promises to be different, he has also suggested the government should do little to assist families engulfed by the subprime mortgage crisis. He has tried to have it both ways on foreign policy as well, assembling a team of advisers drawn equally from the realist and neoconservative camps. McCain has criticized the Bush Administration's unilateralism while slamming those who want to "cut and run"

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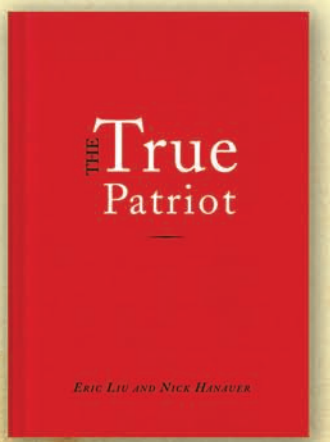

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from Iraq and indicating his openness to trying regime change in neighboring Iran.

More than ever before, McCain must hope his reputation as a maverick will lead voters to forget he's actually a conservative Republican. He will undoubtedly try to overcome the baggage his party carries by framing his campaign less around issues than character: the plainspoken war hero running against an out-of-touch liberal elitist. Should his opponent be Barack Obama, we will surely be hearing plenty more about flag pins and the Rev. Jeremiah Wright. The strategy might succeed, but it also risks reinforcing the impression that while one party is promising change, the other is reaching into its familiar bag of tricks to disguise the fact that it is offering more of the same. "The Republican brand has been so badly damaged that if Republicans try to run an anti-Obama, anti-Reverend Wright, or (if Senator Clinton wins), anti-Clinton campaign, they are simply going to fail," argued Gingrich in his recent article in *Human Events*.

It's a bit early to say whether Gingrich will be proven right, or for that matter whether the Age of Bush has brought an era to a definitive close. But at the least, it has shattered an illusion, leaving the right in need not merely of an image makeover but of structural repair, something McCain almost surely won't give it, and thus giving progressives an opportunity they have not had in a long time. As historian Rick Perlstein puts it, "Conservatives have always been able to say, 'just wait until we get control of the government—then you'll see the wonderful things we can do.' Well, the dog finally caught the car it was chasing, and most of the country thinks the result has been nothing but ruin." ■

Manufacturing a Food Crisis

How "free trade" is destroying Third World agriculture—and who's fighting back.

by WALDEN BELLO

When tens of thousands of people staged demonstrations in Mexico last year to protest a 60 percent increase in the price of tortillas, many analysts pointed to biofuel as the culprit. Because of US government subsidies, American farmers were devoting more and more acreage to corn for ethanol than for food, which sparked a steep rise in corn prices. The diversion of corn from tortillas to biofuel was certainly one cause of skyrocketing prices, though speculation on biofuel demand by transnational middlemen may have played a bigger role. However, an intriguing question escaped many observers: how on earth did Mexicans, who live in the land where corn was domesticated, become dependent on US imports in the first place?

The Mexican food crisis cannot be fully understood without taking into account the fact that in the years preceding the tortilla crisis, the homeland of corn had been converted to a corn-importing economy by "free market" policies promoted by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and Washington. The process began with the early 1980s debt crisis. One of the two largest developing-country debtors, Mexico was forced to beg for money from the Bank and IMF to service its debt to international commercial banks. The quid pro quo for a multibillion-dollar bailout was what a member of the World Bank executive board described as "unprecedented thoroughgoing interventionism" designed to eliminate high tariffs, state regulations and government support institutions, which neoliberal doctrine identified as barriers to economic efficiency.

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In an Aztec ceremony in February in Mexico City, protection is invoked for Mexican corn during a protest against NAFTA's removal of import tariffs.

Interest payments rose from 19 percent of total government expenditures in 1982 to 57 percent in 1988, while capital expenditures dropped from an already low 19.3 percent to 4.4 percent. The contraction of government spending translated into the dismantling of state credit, government-subsidized agricultural inputs, price supports, state marketing boards and extension services. Unilateral liberalization of agricultural trade pushed by the IMF and World Bank also contributed to the destabilization of peasant producers.

This blow to peasant agriculture was followed by an even larger one in 1994, when the North American Free Trade Agreement went into effect. Although NAFTA had a fifteen-year phaseout of tariff protection for agricultural products, including corn, highly subsidized US corn quickly flooded in, reducing prices by half and plunging the corn sector into chronic crisis. Largely as a result of this agreement, Mexico's status as a net food importer has now been firmly established.

With the shutting down of the state marketing agency for corn, distribution of US corn imports and Mexican grain has come to be monopolized by a few transnational traders, like US-owned Cargill and partly US-owned Maseca, operating

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on both sides of the border. This has given them tremendous power to speculate on trade trends, so that movements in biofuel demand can be manipulated and magnified many times over. At the same time, monopoly control of domestic trade has ensured that a rise in international corn prices does not translate into significantly higher prices paid to small producers.

It has become increasingly difficult for Mexican corn farmers to avoid the fate of many of their fellow corn cultivators and other smallholders in sectors such as rice, beef, poultry and pork, who have gone under because of the advantages conferred by NAFTA on subsidized US producers. According to a 2003 Carnegie Endowment report, imports of US agricultural products threw at least 1.3 million farmers out of work—many of whom have since found their way to the United States.

Prospects are not good, since the Mexican government continues to be controlled by neoliberals who are systematically dismantling the peasant support system, a key legacy of the Mexican Revolution. As Food First executive director Eric Holt-Giménez sees it, "It will take time and effort to recover smallholder capacity, and there does not appear to be any political will for this—to say nothing of the fact that NAFTA would have to be renegotiated."

Creating a Rice Crisis in the Philippines

That the global food crisis stems mainly from free-market restructuring of agriculture is clearer in the case of rice. Unlike corn, less than 10 percent of world rice production is traded. Moreover, there has been no diversion of rice from food consumption to biofuels. Yet this year alone, prices nearly tripled, from $380 a ton in January to more than $1,000 in April. Undoubtedly the inflation stems partly from speculation by wholesaler cartels at a time of tightening supplies. However, as with Mexico and corn, the big puzzle is why a number of formerly self-sufficient rice-consuming countries have become severely dependent on imports.

The Philippines provides a grim example of how neoliberal economic restructuring transforms a country from a net food exporter to a net food importer. The Philippines is the world's largest importer of rice. Manila's desperate effort to secure supplies at any price has become front-page news, and pictures of soldiers providing security for rice distribution in poor communities have become emblematic of the global crisis.

The broad contours of the Philippines story are similar to those of Mexico. Dictator Ferdinand Marcos was guilty of many crimes and misdeeds, including failure to follow through on land reform, but one thing he cannot be accused of is starving the agricultural sector. To head off peasant discontent, the regime provided farmers with subsidized fertilizer and seeds, launched credit plans and built rural infrastructure. When Marcos fled the country in 1986, there were 900,000 metric tons of rice in government warehouses.

Paradoxically, the next few years under the new democratic dispensation saw the gutting of government investment capacity. As in Mexico the World Bank and IMF, working on behalf of international creditors, pressured the Corazon Aquino administration to make repayment of the $26 billion foreign debt a priority. Aquino acquiesced, though she was warned by the country's top economists that the "search for a recovery program that is consistent with a debt repayment schedule deter-

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mined by our creditors is a futile one." Between 1986 and 1993 8 percent to 10 percent of GDP left the Philippines yearly in debt-service payments—roughly the same proportion as in Mexico. Interest payments as a percentage of expenditures rose from 7 percent in 1980 to 28 percent in 1994; capital expenditures plunged from 26 percent to 16 percent. In short, debt servicing became the national budgetary priority.

Spending on agriculture fell by more than half. The World Bank and its local acolytes were not worried, however, since one purpose of the belt-tightening was to get the private sector to energize the countryside. But agricultural capacity quickly eroded. Irrigation stagnated, and by the end of the 1990s only 17 percent of the Philippines' road network was paved, compared with 82 percent in Thailand and 75 percent in Malaysia. Crop yields were generally anemic, with the average rice yield way below those in China, Vietnam and Thailand, where governments actively promoted rural production. The post-Marcos agrarian reform program shriveled, deprived of funding for support services, which had been the key to successful reforms in Taiwan and South Korea. As in Mexico Filipino peasants were confronted with full-scale retreat of the state as provider of comprehensive support—a role they had come to depend on.

And the cutback in agricultural programs was followed by trade liberalization, with the Philippines' 1995 entry into the World Trade Organization having the same effect as Mexico's joining NAFTA. WTO membership required the Philippines to eliminate quotas on all agricultural imports except rice and allow a certain amount of each commodity to enter at low tariff rates. While the country was allowed to maintain a quota on rice imports, it nevertheless had to admit the equivalent of 1 to 4 percent of domestic consumption over the next ten years. In fact, because of gravely weakened production resulting from lack of state support, the government imported much more than that to make up for shortfalls. The massive imports depressed the price of rice, discouraging farmers and keeping growth in production at a rate far below that of the country's two top suppliers, Thailand and Vietnam.

The consequences of the Philippines' joining the WTO barreled through the rest of its agriculture like a super-typhoon. Swamped by cheap corn imports—much of it subsidized US grain—farmers reduced land devoted to corn from 3.1 million hectares in 1993 to 2.5 million in 2000. Massive importation of chicken parts nearly killed that industry, while surges in imports destabilized the poultry, hog and vegetable industries.

During the 1994 campaign to ratify WTO membership, government economists, coached by their World Bank handlers, promised that losses in corn and other traditional crops would be more than compensated for by the new export industry of "high-value-added" crops like cut flowers, asparagus and broccoli. Little of this materialized. Nor did many of the 500,000 agricultural jobs that were supposed to be created yearly by the magic of the market; instead, agricultural employment dropped from 11.2 million in 1994 to 10.8 million in 2001.

The one-two punch of IMF-imposed adjustment and WTO-imposed trade liberalization swiftly transformed a largely self-sufficient agricultural economy into an import-dependent one as it steadily marginalized farmers. It was a wrenching process, the pain of which was captured by a Filipino government negotiator during a WTO session in Geneva. "Our small produc-

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ers," he said, "are being slaughtered by the gross unfairness of the international trading environment."

The Great Transformation

The experience of Mexico and the Philippines was paralleled in one country after another subjected to the ministrations of the IMF and the WTO. A study of fourteen countries by the UN's Food and Agricultural Organization found that the levels of food imports in 1995–98 exceeded those in 1990–94. This was not surprising, since one of the main goals of the WTO's Agreement on Agriculture was to open up markets in developing countries so they could absorb surplus production in the North. As then–US Agriculture Secretary John Block put it in 1986, "The idea that developing countries should feed themselves is an anachronism from a bygone era. They could better ensure their food security by relying on US agricultural products, which are available in most cases at lower cost."

What Block did not say was that the lower cost of US products stemmed from subsidies, which became more massive with each passing year despite the fact that the WTO was supposed to phase them out. From $367 billion in 1995, the total amount of agricultural subsidies provided by developed-country governments rose to $388 billion in 2004. Since the late 1990s subsidies have accounted for 40 percent of the value of agricultural production in the European Union and 25 percent in the United States.

The apostles of the free market and the defenders of dumping may seem to be at different ends of the spectrum, but the policies they advocate are bringing about the same result: a globalized capitalist industrial agriculture. Developing countries are being integrated into a system where export-oriented production of meat and grain is dominated by large industrial farms like those run by the Thai multinational CP and where technology is continually upgraded by advances in genetic engineering from firms like Monsanto. And the elimination of tariff and nontariff barriers is facilitating a global agricultural supermarket of elite and middle-class consumers serviced by grain-trading corporations like Cargill and Archer Daniels Midland and transnational food retailers like the British-owned Tesco and the French-owned Carrefour.

There is little room for the hundreds of millions of rural and urban poor in this integrated global market. They are confined to giant suburban favelas, where they contend with food prices that are often much higher than the supermarket prices, or to rural reservations, where they are trapped in marginal agricultural activities and increasingly vulnerable to hunger. Indeed, within the same country, famine in the marginalized sector sometimes coexists with prosperity in the globalized sector.

This is not simply the erosion of national food self-sufficiency or food security but what Africanist Deborah Bryceson of Oxford calls "de-peasantization"—the phasing out of a mode of production to make the countryside a more congenial site for intensive capital accumulation. This transformation is a traumatic one for hundreds of millions of people, since peasant production is not simply an economic activity. It is an ancient way of life, a culture, which is one reason displaced or marginalized peasants in India have taken to committing suicide. In the state of Andhra Pradesh, farmer suicides rose from 233 in 1998 to 2,600 in 2002; in Maharashtra, suicides more than tripled, from 1,083 in 1995 to 3,926 in 2005. One estimate is that some 150,000 Indian farmers have taken their lives. Collapse of prices from trade liberalization and loss of control over seeds to biotech firms is part of a comprehensive problem, says global justice activist Vandana Shiva: "Under globalization, the farmer is losing her/his social, cultural, economic identity as a producer. A farmer is now a 'consumer' of costly seeds and costly chemicals sold by powerful global corporations through powerful landlords and money lenders locally."

African Agriculture: From Compliance to Defiance

De-peasantization is at an advanced state in Latin America and Asia. And if the World Bank has its way, Africa will travel in the same direction. As Bryceson and her colleagues correctly point out in a recent article, the *World Development Report* for 2008, which touches extensively on agriculture in Africa, is practically a blueprint for the transformation of the continent's peasant-based agriculture into large-scale commercial farming. However, as in many other places today, the Bank's wards are moving from sullen resentment to outright defiance.

At the time of decolonization, in the 1960s, Africa was actually a net food exporter. Today the continent imports 25 percent of its food; almost every country is a net importer. Hunger and famine have become recurrent phenomena, with the past three years alone seeing food emergencies break out in the Horn of Africa, the Sahel, and Southern and Central Africa.

Agriculture in Africa is in deep crisis, and the causes range from wars to bad governance, lack of agricultural technology and the spread of HIV/AIDS. However, as in Mexico and the Philippines, an important part of the explanation is the phasing out of government controls and support mechanisms under the IMF and World Bank structural adjustment programs imposed as the price for assistance in servicing external debt.

Structural adjustment brought about declining investment, increased unemployment, reduced social spending, reduced consumption and low output. Lifting price controls on fertilizers while simultaneously cutting back on agricultural credit systems simply led to reduced fertilizer use, lower yields and lower investment. Moreover, reality refused to conform to the doctrinal expectation that withdrawal of the state would pave the way for the market to dynamize agriculture. Instead, the private sector, which correctly saw reduced state expenditures as creating more risk, failed to step into the breach. In country after country, the departure of the state "crowded out" rather than "crowded in" private investment. Where private traders did replace the state, noted an Oxfam report, "they have sometimes done so on highly unfavorable terms for poor farmers," leaving "farmers more food insecure, and governments reliant on unpredictable international aid flows." The usually pro–private sector *Economist* agreed, admitting that "many of the private firms brought in to replace state researchers turned out to be rent-seeking monopolists."

The support that African governments were allowed to muster was channeled by the World Bank toward export agriculture to generate foreign exchange, which states needed to service debt. But, as in Ethiopia during the 1980s famine, this

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led to the dedication of good land to export crops, with food crops forced into less suitable soil, thus exacerbating food insecurity. Moreover, the World Bank's encouragement of several economies to focus on the same export crops often led to overproduction, triggering price collapses in international markets. For instance, the very success of Ghana's expansion of cocoa production triggered a 48 percent drop in the international price between 1986 and 1989. In 2002–03 a collapse in coffee prices contributed to another food emergency in Ethiopia.

As in Mexico and the Philippines, structural adjustment in Africa was not simply about underinvestment but state divestment. But there was one major difference. In Africa the World Bank and IMF micromanaged, making decisions on how fast subsidies should be phased out, how many civil servants had to be fired and even, as in the case of Malawi, how much of the country's grain reserve should be sold and to whom.

Compounding the negative impact of adjustment were unfair EU and US trade practices. Liberalization allowed subsidized EU beef to drive many West African and South African cattle raisers to ruin. With their subsidies legitimized by the WTO, US growers offloaded cotton on world markets at 20 percent to 55 percent of production cost, thereby bankrupting West and Central African farmers.

According to Oxfam, the number of sub-Saharan Africans living on less than a dollar a day almost doubled, to 313 million, between 1981 and 2001—46 percent of the whole continent. The role of structural adjustment in creating poverty was hard to deny. As the World Bank's chief economist for Africa admitted, "We did not think that the human costs of these programs could be so great, and the economic gains would be so slow in coming."

In 1999 the government of Malawi initiated a program to give each smallholder family a starter pack of free fertilizers and seeds. The result was a national surplus of corn. What came after is a story that should be enshrined as a classic case study of one of the greatest blunders of neoliberal economics. The World Bank and other aid donors forced the scaling down and eventual scrapping of the program, arguing that the subsidy distorted trade. Without the free packs, output plummeted. In the meantime, the IMF insisted that the government sell off a large portion of its grain reserves to enable the food reserve agency to settle its commercial debts. The government complied. When the food crisis turned into a famine in 2001–02, there were hardly any reserves left. About 1,500 people perished. The IMF was unrepentant; in fact, it suspended its disbursements on an adjustment program on the grounds that "the parastatal sector will continue to pose risks to the successful implementation of the 2002/03 budget. Government interventions in the food and other agricultural markets… [are] crowding out more productive spending."

By the time an even worse food crisis developed in 2005, the government had had enough of World Bank/IMF stupidity. A new president reintroduced the fertilizer subsidy, enabling 2 million households to buy it at a third of the retail price and seeds at a discount. The result: bumper harvests for two years, a million-ton maize surplus and the country transformed into a supplier of corn to Southern Africa.

Malawi's defiance of the World Bank would probably have been an act of heroic but futile resistance a decade ago. The environment is different today, since structural adjustment has been discredited throughout Africa. Even some donor governments and NGOs that used to subscribe to it have distanced themselves from the Bank. Perhaps the motivation is to prevent their influence in the continent from being further eroded by association with a failed approach and unpopular institutions when Chinese aid is emerging as an alternative to World Bank, IMF and Western government aid programs.

Food Sovereignty: An Alternative Paradigm?

It is not only defiance from governments like Malawi and dissent from their erstwhile allies that are undermining the IMF and the World Bank. Peasant organizations around the world have become increasingly militant in their resistance to the globalization of industrial agriculture. Indeed, it is because of pressure from farmers' groups that the governments of the South have refused to grant wider access to their agricultural markets and demanded a massive slashing of US and EU agricultural subsidies, which brought the WTO's Doha Round of negotiations to a standstill.

Farmers' groups have networked internationally; one of the most dynamic to emerge is Via Campesina (Peasant's Path). Via not only seeks to get "WTO out of agriculture" and opposes the paradigm of a globalized capitalist industrial agriculture; it also proposes an alternative—food sovereignty. Food sovereignty means, first of all, the right of a country to determine its production and consumption of food and the exemption of agriculture from global trade regimes like that of the WTO. It also means consolidation of a smallholder-centered agriculture via protection of the domestic market from low-priced imports; remunerative prices for farmers and fisherfolk; abolition of all direct and indirect export subsidies; and the phasing out of domestic subsidies that promote unsustainable agriculture. Via's platform also calls for an end to the Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights regime, or TRIPs, which allows corporations to patent plant seeds; opposes agro-technology based on genetic engineering; and demands land reform. In contrast to an integrated global monoculture, Via offers the vision of an international agricultural economy composed of diverse national agricultural economies trading with one another but focused primarily on domestic production.

Once regarded as relics of the pre-industrial era, peasants are now leading the opposition to a capitalist industrial agriculture that would consign them to the dustbin of history. They have become what Karl Marx described as a politically conscious "class for itself," contradicting his predictions about their demise. With the global food crisis, they are moving to center stage—and they have allies and supporters. For as peasants refuse to go gently into that good night and fight depeasantization, developments in the twenty-first century are revealing the panacea of globalized capitalist industrial agriculture to be a nightmare. With environmental crises multiplying, the social dysfunctions of urban-industrial life piling up and industrialized agriculture creating greater food insecurity, the farmers' movement increasingly has relevance not only to peasants but to everyone threatened by the catastrophic consequences of global capital's vision for organizing production, community and life itself. ■

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Haiti on the 'Death Plan'

Protesters decry high food prices—and the savage cost of neoliberalism.

by REED LINDSAY

We hit the first barricade just a few miles north of Les Cayes, one of the largest cities in Haiti. A dozen machete-wielding peasants stood defiantly in front of a tangle of rocks, tree branches and enormous concrete pipes. Incensed at the sight of cameras and suspicious of the *blan* (foreigners), they refused to let us pass and threatened to seize our vehicle. After a half-hour of our arguing and pleading, the blockade's dreadlocked leader let us bypass the barricade on a dirt road that cut through banana fields and thatched huts. The next barricade was only a few minutes away, an immovable tree trunk adorned with an enormous fading Coca-Cola sign. A bare-chested peasant armed with an ax was finally persuaded to hack off a car's width passage of timber. Further ahead, the barricading protesters only increased in their proximity to one another, their aversion to transit and their creative use of materials—boulders, nail-embedded two-by-fours, the rusted chassis of an abandoned semi-truck, an overturned boat. Eight hours and some twenty blockades later, with the flaming barricades of the city of Aquin looming ahead, we cut our losses and repeated the same journey in reverse.

Thousands of protesters had paralyzed Les Cayes for nearly a week, beginning April 3, covering streets in rocks, broken-down cars and burning tires. Community leaders demanded the government lower food prices, set a date for the departure of UN peacekeepers and end the "death plan," a reference to the neoliberal economic policies that have prevailed in Haiti for more than two decades. Meanwhile, Port-au-Prince was overrun by bands of rock-throwing protesters, who set fire to gas stations, looted businesses and assailed the presidential palace. Similar demonstrations exploded in the cities of Petit Goâve, Léogâne and Gonaïves. The barricades were finally lifted when President René Préval promised to subsidize the price of imported rice by 15 percent and the Parliament sacked the prime minister.

'Clorox Hunger'

The last time the country mobilized so massively and with such ferocity was February 13, 2006, one week after the presidential election. Haiti's electoral council had just announced that Préval's ballot count had slipped below the 50 percent he needed to avoid a runoff against his nearest competitor, who had less than a quarter as many votes. Hundreds of barricades went up spontaneously across the country, and a throng of protesters from the slums stormed the posh Hotel Montana, headquarters of the electoral council, where top diplomats huddled. Haiti's international patrons panicked, and they quickly prevailed upon the electoral council to declare Préval the victor.

Reed Lindsay is a freelance journalist based in Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

ARIANA CUBILLOS/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Haitians protesting high food prices in Port-au-Prince in April

Préval made no campaign promises. Like his onetime ally Jean-Bertrand Aristide, his popularity is rooted in the belief of the Haitian masses that he is on their side. But two years into his term, many people have grown impatient waiting for a change that has not come.

Admittedly, Préval has faced a difficult balancing act, wedged between the money and coercion of traditional foreign powers (the United States, Canada and France, and the attendant peacekeeping mission and financial institutions) and ramped-up aid programs from Cuba and Venezuela, between a tiny elite that controls the economy and the vast majority of Haitians who live in poverty, and between a bevy of predatory parties that control Parliament and Aristide, who continues to loom large even in exile in South Africa.

Préval has played the conciliator, mollifying opponents and Aristide supporters by giving them posts in his government, accepting sizable aid packages from Bush and Chávez, and allowing peacekeepers to root out armed gangs from the slums despite what UN officials have called "collateral damage." Meanwhile, the International Monetary Fund has commended the government for its fiscal policy, praising its "extraordinary commitment to their program of reform" and "track record for implementing difficult policies." But things have not improved for Haiti's poor. In fact, they have worsened exponentially.

Food prices have soared in the past year, with imported rice, Haiti's main staple, nearly doubling since last fall. For the 4.5 million Haitians who scrape by on less than a dollar a day and spend more than half of their meager income on food, the impact has been devastating.

"Everything has changed," said 30-year-old Hernite Joseph, who sells imported chicken parts at Port-au-Prince's La Saline market. "My kids are like toothpicks. Before, if you had $1.25, you could buy vegetables, some rice, 10 cents of charcoal and a little cooking oil. Right now, a little can of rice alone costs 65 cents, and it's not good rice at all. Oil is 25 cents.

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Charcoal is 25 cents. With $1.25, you can't even make a plate of rice for one child."

In March, Haitians began talking of a "Clorox" hunger so painful that it feels as if they had swallowed bleach or battery acid. The powder keg exploded in Les Cayes in early April, when thousands of protesters demanding lower food prices clashed with peacekeepers and knocked down the walls of a UN military base. Resentment against the UN mission runs high among the poor, who argue that its $500 million annual budget would be better spent on development than on troops and tanks. Préval, who does not have a spokesperson and who rarely addresses the nation (unlike Aristide, who did so frequently during his presidency), took a week to respond to the protests.

"The electorate feels ignored and neglected," said Patrick Elie, a longtime activist whom Préval named to head a commission to study the possible creation of a new security force. "The population is frustrated not only by the reality of rising food prices but by the policy of this government, which has found it more appropriate to woo its political adversaries and the international community rather than cultivate the very electorate that put it in power, an electorate that is mostly made of poor people."

Still, Elie insists the protests were ignited by opponents and drug traffickers seeking to destabilize the government.

"The signs are clear," he said. "What you saw were political operators, commandos, out to wreak havoc, to provoke a situation of instability so that some people might profit from it.… You don't go to the palace looking for rice. You go to the palace because you want to create a political situation."

A week before the Les Cayes protests, Guy Philippe, the former rebel leader who helped topple Aristide and then received less than 2 percent of the vote as a presidential candidate against Préval, evaded a raid by DEA agents allegedly looking to arrest him on drug-trafficking charges. Philippe had dodged a similar foray last July in Les Cayes, where he was living.

Another prime suspect named by some observers is Youri Latortue, the shadowy security chief for his uncle, former de facto Prime Minister Gérard Latortue. In the wake of the protests, Latortue led opposition senators in the no-confidence vote that ousted Prime Minister Jacques-Édouard Alexis. The theory goes that the protests were sparked to undermine the government's fight against the drug trade and corruption—Préval has allowed prominent members of the elite to be jailed for fraud, and he has condemned cocaine trafficking as a threat to the country's security and stability—and to politically eliminate Alexis, who was close to Préval and a leading prospect to succeed him as president.

Hooked on Rice

If the machinations behind the protests are open to speculation, the roots of the economic crisis that drove most people to take to the streets are well documented.

In the past twenty years, Haiti has gone from being a country that could nearly feed itself to one that is treacherously dependent on the United States and, as recent months have proved, vulnerable to the vagaries of world commodities prices, especially that of rice.

For centuries, rice was grown in the rain-soaked Artibonite Valley and until recently eaten only on Sundays and special occasions. Haitians lived mostly off a wide array of grains and starchy tubers, including corn, millet, manioc, breadfruit, yams, sweet potatoes and plantains.

In 1987 cheap imports began flooding Haiti under the US-backed military regime that replaced dictator Jean-Claude Duvalier. Officially, rice imports were banned, but under the charge of "Chicago Boy" economist Leslie Delatour, the government turned a blind eye to the contraband. The government even sent soldiers to the Artibonite to protect the black-market imports, which had drawn attacks from angry peasants.

At the time, Delatour told the *New York Times*, "This country's going to be dependent regardless of who's in power; the only thing that is in question is whether it will be dependent on the Americans or someone else."

To whom Haiti would become dependent is no longer in question.

Imports from the United States flooded the country after Aristide returned from exile in 1994 with an IMF structural-adjustment program that would slash tariffs to as low as 3 percent. Since then rice imports from the United States have more than doubled, and they continue to rise.

> 'There's been a decision to destroy the local peasant economy, and we're paying for it dearly now.' —economist Camille Chalmers

Haiti is now the third-largest importer of US-produced rice, behind only Mexico and Japan, and less than 30 percent of the rice consumed in the country is homegrown.

"There's been a decision to destroy the local peasant economy, and we're paying for it dearly now," said Camille Chalmers, an economist with the Haitian Platform to Advocate for Alternative Development. "Since the 1980s, the IMF and World Bank have decreed that we apply structural-adjustment programs to liberalize our finances and foreign commerce, privatize our public enterprises and deregulate foreign investment. They told us that we're right next to the biggest agricultural producer in the world, so there's no reason to produce our own food because we can buy it at a cheap price, and that the peasants should go to the city to sell their labor to American assembly plants to make textiles and electronics for export. Since then, we've gotten poorer, more dependent and more vulnerable to the fluctuations of the international market."

Préval, an agronomist who has lived and worked with peasants in the mountains above the Artibonite, is keenly aware of the destructive impact of economic liberalization. (So must be one of his palace advisers, Elisabeth Delatour, the widow of the liberalizing economist, and the woman with whom Préval is said to be romantically involved.)

"In 1987, when rice began being imported at a cheap price, many people applauded," Préval said in a televised address on April 9 that sought to placate the protesters. "But cheap imported rice destroyed Artibonite rice. Today, imported rice has become expensive, and our national production is in ruins.

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That's why subsidizing imported food is not the answer."

Three days later, Préval did just that. With rumors buzzing of renewed protests, he announced he had struck a deal with the three major importers to cut the price of rice from $51 to $43 for a 110-pound sack. Since then, a coffee can of rice in the street markets has dropped in price by 80 cents to just over $3, but it is not enough to appease the poor.

"It still takes me two or three days to sell a sack," said Marie-Michel Jean, a rice vendor in the muddy Croix-des-Bossales marketplace in downtown Port-au-Prince. "And it's only rice that's gone down, nothing else."

Préval insists that the subsidy is a temporary measure until his government can relaunch national production. He has promised to cut the price of fertilizer in half, thanks in part to a promised donation of 15,000 tons of urea from the Venezuelan government, which also plans to send tractors and agronomists. Meanwhile, other donors that had previously paid little attention to the nation's peasants have declared that they will start investing in agriculture.

But Préval has not indicated he will roll back the free-market policies that have made Haiti's economy one of the most liberalized in Latin America. Préval's economic program, backed by the IMF and World Bank, remains firmly in place. There is little in Haiti left to liberalize, but Préval has marched forward with the privatization of the state-owned telephone company, Teleco, and the electric company and ports are rumored to be awaiting the same fate. Meanwhile, at least until 2010, the government's economic plan stresses "prudent fiscal and monetary policies" to keep inflation in check, at the expense of growth and job creation. The IMF-approved plan touts agriculture as a "pillar of growth," but in practice, investment in agriculture has been minimal. The government will spend 3.5 percent of its $2 billion budget on agriculture this year, barely more than the $50 million in debt payments it will make to the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank. The US Treasury Department politely spurned a letter written by fifty-four US Representatives calling on it to push for immediate debt relief.

On April 27, for the second time in eleven years, Préval nominated Ericq Pierre, a senior official with the Inter-American Development Bank, to become his new prime minister. But Pierre's nomination was rejected by Parliament on May 12. During his first presidency, Préval chose Pierre, but the lower chamber of deputies rejected the economist by a vote of forty-three to nine, with some legislators attacking him for advocating the privatization of state-owned enterprises. The Parliament went on to reject Préval's next two choices, creating a deadlock that, along with contested elections, froze aid and immobilized the government for nearly two years.

As the political intrigue thickens, the poor are waiting, with increasing impatience, for change.

"Demonstrations like this don't happen without a reason," said Walner Bien-Aimé, a peasant from northwestern Haiti. "There is always a cause. And as long as this problem of hunger is not resolved, there will be more." ■

Letters

(continued from page 2)

New York City

Eric Alterman's May 5 column contains inaccuracies. (1) Scholars for Peace in the Middle East (SPME), in its online newsletter, reported but did not take a position on the granting of tenure to Professor Abu El-Haj. Despite numerous requests, SPME did not circulate the petition, precisely because SPME, as an organization of academics, supports "the time-honored tradition of politically disinterested tenure." (2) As an archaeologist, Alexander Joffe has standing to comment on the validity of Abu El-Haj's criticisms of Israeli archaeologists. However, he has no official association with SPME, nor does Daniel Pipes. (3) Although Alan Segal publicly opposed tenure for Abu El-Haj, his opposition focused on her scholarship, not her politics.

Judith S. Jacobson, *vice president, SPME*

Alterman Replies

New York City

I stand by every word in my column. First let's note that neither letter writer points to a single error of fact. The problems they point out are either "implied" or not stated at all. However, with regard to Daniel Pipes's Campus Watch, I think readers would benefit from knowing more about Pipes and the kind of work in which he and his organization engage. According to my colleague Matthew Duss at the Center for American Progress:

"Pipes spearheaded a campaign against the Khalil Gibran International Academy in New York, a public school focused on Arab culture and language. The campaign eventually caused the resignation of the school's principal, Debbie Almontaser. Pipes based his hostility to the school on what he called 'the basic problems implicit in an Arabic-language school: the tendency to Islamist and Arabist content and proselytizing.' Needless to say, Pipes offered no evidence for that claim. In keeping with his stated belief that Arab- and Muslim-Americans deserve to be subjected to 'special scrutiny,' Pipes apparently thinks the question of whether Barack Obama practiced Islam as a child is so important to the future of the Republic that since December he has penned three articles on the subject, always making sure to apply a thin veneer of 'scholarly rigor' over what is in fact an attempt to smear by insinuation and innuendo" (see http://thinkprogress.org/wonkroom/2008/05/05/daniel-pipes-crank/).

Given their involvement in so many campaigns of this nature, it would have been irresponsible of me *not* to include Pipes and Campus Watch in my discussion of the tenure question.

With regard to SPME, I appreciate Judith Jacobson's efforts to clarify the work of her organization. It certainly does not deserve to be lumped with Campus Watch, which is why I avoided doing so. Universities have long-established processes designed to insulate the tenure process from the political passions of the day. Any interference in that process is contrary to the principle of academic freedom.

Eric Alterman

Dancing at the Revolution

Wyoming, Mich.

I was shocked to see Emma Goldman in your subscription ad. In your eyes she may have been one of the "somebodies" who read *The Nation*, but in my eyes she was the inspiration behind the murder of President McKinley. This is outrageous!

James Hayden

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Books & the Arts.

PETER ZSCHUNKE/ASSOCIATED PRESS

A view from Second Life, February 2007

Playing Games

by STEPHEN TOTILO

Imagine a modern video game player, probably a guy sitting on a couch. He presses buttons on a controller. He is engaged with a TV screen but otherwise detached from the world. His entertainment may be interactive, but he appears the very opposite of an activist. He is hypnotized by the screen.

It may be a common image, but it is not the impression Peter Ludlow, a philosophy professor at the University of Toronto, got in 2003 when he heard what some players of the game EverQuest had just done. EverQuest was one of the first widely successful massively multiplayer online (MMO) computer games, which allow players from around the world to log on to their computers, take the role of a fantasy character—a swordsman or mystic, for example—and experience adventures together. Dozens, even hundreds, could join together via the Internet to control characters that appeared on the same networked stage. What Ludlow discovered in 2003 was that a group of EverQuest players had simultaneously logged on and banded together to slay a dragon monster called Kerafyrm—a creature that the game's developers had programmed to be unconquerable. It was the players' second such attempt. The first time they tried to kill the beast, developers working for the game's corporate parent, Sony Online Entertainment, alarmed at the players' abilities to circumvent the rules, reset the game and blocked them from achieving their goal. The players became furious, posting on message boards that "a level of trust [was] destroyed." The developers backed off, and a few days later the gamers took the monster down.

Playing video games, Ludlow and others have reasoned, is about more than that guy on the couch. It's about pushing boundaries—trying to find the fractures in the worlds created by game developers by driving off the racetrack, figuring out the pattern in Pac-Man so that you never lose a life, killing the unkillable monster. Playing games, in other words, can instill revolutionary zeal—a fight against the machine. And the act of playing a massively multiplayer online game? That can inspire the zeal not just to knock down a machine but to create a better one.

Stephen Totilo covers the video game beat for MTV News *and edits the Multiplayer gaming blog (multiplayer.mtv.com).*

The Second Life Herald

The Virtual Tabloid That Witnessed the Dawn of the Metaverse.
By Peter Ludlow and Mark Wallace.
MIT. 295 pp. $29.95.

All video games are products, and they may well be art. Online worlds like EverQuest, populated by thousands of players who spend dozens of hours a week adventuring in them, socializing in them, buying and selling things in them—sometimes with real money—are more than games. They are societies that are literally products, societies whose government is… who? The developers who shut off the game when the dragon is about to be killed? The corporation that sells the computer program that makes the whole thing run on your computer? The programmers who create the rules and possibilities for play? Or the people who hang out in the world five hours a night and who, by their actions, establish the norms? MMOs may be

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just another theme park, in which the people who pass through the turnstiles have little say or control over how high and fast the rides go. Or they may represent a wholly new frontier.

Virtual world stakes are both lower and higher than they are in real life. Some residents treat their characters as playthings, no more meaningful a vessel for their consciousness or more useful as an instrument of social change than Super Mario Brothers. But some use the character they control—their avatar—in ways Super Mario Brothers would never allow: to socialize and deal in real commerce, creativity and matters of the libido and heart. And the powers that reign—the representatives behind the game, ranging from the system administrator walking her character through the same fields as the player to the executives at the top of the corporation that funded the programming of the game—rule not primarily with standards enforceable by law but by controlling the very physics of their lands. If they desire, they could rewrite lines of computer code to ban all avatars of a certain color (they haven't); or to upend roadside commercial property values by granting every citizen a means to teleport anywhere (they did); or simply to raise the sun, drop the moon or plunk down a new continent of land.

It's beat the online virtual world, the *Second Life Herald* strives to be 'always fairly unbalanced.'

The Second Life Herald is the history of what Ludlow found with co-author and reporter Mark Wallace in the game The Sims Online (TSO) and the not-quite-a-game massively multiplayer virtual world Second Life. (Wallace now has his own second life as co-founder and CEO of Wello Horld, a start-up developing virtual web technologies.) In TSO Ludlow controlled a character; in Second Life they both did. They visited these worlds by the seat of their pants, using mouse and keyboard to play the role of journalists. Together they reported on the stresses of a growing group of avatars chafing against the laws, and lawlessness, of the virtual world and the software-company architects who played the role of governors and gods.

The Second Life Herald isn't really a history of the online newspapers Ludlow and Wallace created. It's an account of virtual world unrest as witnessed (and sometimes participated in) by Ludlow's avatars—Urizenus in TSO and Urizenus Sklar in Second Life. The philosophy professor had been a participant in chat rooms, video games and text-based virtual worlds since the 1980s. In August 2003 he entered TSO. Partially inspired by the role Benjamin Franklin played establishing the independent press in the Penn Colony in the eighteenth century, he decided to detail the activities of the neighborhood he lived in, Alphaville. So that October he launched the *Herald*. To kick things off, he wrote an editorial, asking, "What are the legal, social, and economic implications of what is happening in our MMO?" Answering that question would be the virtual journalists' mission. And keeping check on City Hall—whatever that was.

With few models to follow, Ludlow and Wallace pioneered the role of virtual world journalist. Newspapers weren't programmed into these online worlds, and they weren't always met with approval by the people running them. The *Herald*, published on its own website separate from the game world, became a chronicle of other gamers' boundary-pushing acts and an example of one. It made Ludlow and Wallace digital muckrakers. The paper was casual—someone might write about fashion, i.e., what the avatars were wearing. Someone might get fixated on an issue and file a series of reports, generally based on interviews culled from character-to-character text chats (imagine an exchange over Instant Messenger). Contributors came and went. Those who stuck around as regular freelancers would, in one era of the paper, at least, command $2 to $8 for articles of a few hundred words. Photos for these articles were screen shots, moments of in-world activity captured and saved with a couple of keystrokes. As of January 2005, the *Herald* had more than 1,000 unique readers a day out of a virtual community that, Second Life's CEO told me, in late 2004 had 15,000 users. (The *Herald* is still being published today at secondlifeherald.com.)

The book shares the who and why but doesn't dwell on the what, when and how of the papers' histories. This history of—official subtitle incoming—"The Virtual Tabloid That Witnessed the Dawn of the Metaverse" is mostly vague about certain details. There's little information about the *Herald*'s schedule: it seems the authors did one story per weekday for a while; later, with freelancers, as many as five. We don't learn much about the process of running a virtual newspaper or how that changed over the course of four years, how one courts advertising or deals with competition. It's a fine history of the ideas behind their reporting, but it seems odd to write about a supposedly pioneering newspaper and mention so little about how the operation actually worked. We do learn its slogan, "Always Fairly Unbalanced," and that despite any headiness, the paper regularly featured risqué content. In fact, the article that drew the most comments ever was a lengthy chat between Ludlow and an anonymous "submissive" player about TSO's emerging bondage scene. While explaining the good and bad of the game's definitely not company-sanctioned BDSM (bondage, domination, sadism, masochism) community, Anonymous opined, "There are a lot of people who come into the community only with a view of getting their rocks off and taking advantage of subs." Bear in mind that TSO graphics displayed activities little more explicit than cuddling, making the meaning of "taking advantage" a central question of the interview. More than 400 comments ensued.

The Sims Online was launched in late 2002 by video game publisher Electronic Arts (EA). It was the first online edition of the popular Sims computer game series, which let players control the residents of a home as if it were a digital dollhouse. Sims itself was an outgrowth of the Sim City urban-planning series, created by game designer Will Wright. Everything about TSO was supposed to be major league. The Sims-branded games had sold millions of copies. Electronic Arts was and still is one of the world's largest video game companies, and Wright was and still is seen as one of the world's top two or three game developers. TSO would let thousands and, EA hoped, even millions of people play a Sims-style game on a grand, networked scale, making the MMO style of game inviting for people who didn't want to kill dragons. To join TSO, a player had to buy the game ($50) and pay a monthly subscription fee ($10). TSO made the cover of *Newsweek*, but its popularity sputtered and it never reached its intended millions. (MMOs that involved killing dragons, like World of Warcraft, launched in 2004, did.)

The programmed goal of TSO isn't society building and certainly isn't journalism. Players are supposed to keep their characters "green," meaning they must keep meters measuring such things as hunger, rest and social happiness at a healthy level; they also work scripted, mouse-click-driven virtual jobs to earn fake money to buy virtual things. What caught Ludlow's attention was what players did unofficially—trade their Simolean "money" or, say, a virtual poodle for real money over eBay, scam new players, hack the

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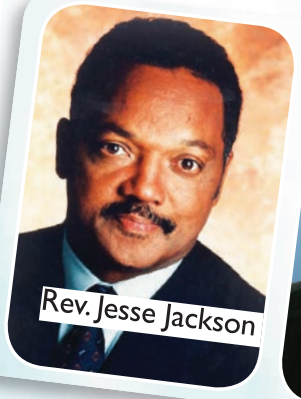
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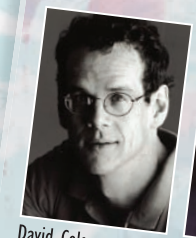
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program to automate all the greening tasks, attack other players by tagging them with red enemy links, form Mafias to attack more aggressively, form a Sims Shadow Government to combat those Mafias and so forth. They pushed boundaries the way the EverQuest players had when they attacked Kerafyrm.

While all that provided Ludlow with enough material for months of stories, he was most energized by the way Electronic Arts reacted to his coverage. In December 2003, EA kicked Ludlow out of TSO. In a story that made the front page of the *New York Times*, Ludlow was cited for cheating and for the infraction of listing a commercial site (the never quite clearly money-generating alphavilleherald.com) in his game profile. He assumed EA was just trying to shut him up and got a chance to vent his claim in a segment that appeared on *The Daily Show*—the very show that later provided an inspirational model for him and Wallace at the *Second Life Herald*. "The paper (like *The Daily Show*)," they write, "was at its best when it skated the line between fun and serious business." (When I interviewed Ludlow last spring for an article about the virtual journalists in Second Life, he told me, "I think when we're at our best is when we're right on the edge, when people aren't really sure if we're playing a reporter or if we're being serious reporters.")

Second Life's ethics can be strictly pragmatic: if a behavior isn't blocked, then it must be OK.

Was virtual reporting a real role or just role play? Was Ludlow's beat a real world or just a fancy Monopoly board? The seriousness of what's going on in the virtual worlds fluctuates in the telling, but the progression of Ludlow and Wallace's account is one that undulates generally upward, to higher and higher stakes. In Second Life, where Ludlow next roosted and where Wallace joined him, users are granted more power. Second Life, launched a year after TSO to slower and steadier growth, had a stranger design. It looked like a video game but wasn't meant to be played—just lived in. There were no meters measuring health or strength. It was more like a visual chat room, a shared continent where avatars could dwell and users could create objects and animations. It was founded by a small company called Linden Lab and has been free to visit for anyone who downloads a Second Life software program onto their home computer. After some early changes in payment structures, Linden Lab settled on collecting fees from players who rent land on Second Life's continent, upon which they can build virtual homes and businesses. (Monthly fees range between $5 and $195 depending on the size of the plot.)

Trading virtual money for real money is encouraged and endorsed by Linden Lab. Most of the virtual items and applications created in the Second Life world are made by the users. Their creations include everything from avatar clothing and virtual buildings, books and furniture to nongeneric animations for characters, which could be waving, hugging, dancing and, of course, having sex in lots of different positions. These creations remain the intellectual property of those users, safe to buy and sell to others. Goods can't be resold, but some users have tried to hack the software to create duplicates of objects. (The *Herald* followed the story, of course.)

The great powers granted by Linden Lab were essentially greater liberties. And in bequeathing so much influence and ability to their customers, Linden Lab ensured that its virtual world would be a laboratory for the ramifications of such extended freedom. One thing Ludlow found was that some of the players of TSO who behaved badly in that restrictive virtual world changed when given a taste of the greater liberty of Second Life. A few TSO scammers started "making and selling clothing, hair extensions and fashion accessories, and becoming an active part of Second Life's commercial scene." In an interview with one of them, Ludlow was told that they had been scammers—or, in MMO parlance, "griefers"—in the previous game because it was a good way to get attention. Ludlow reasoned that Second Life gave them more acceptable avenues to gain notice. Referring to Ludlow's avatar in the third person, Ludlow and Wallace write:

> What Uri had been saying all along was more clear than ever now.... If the tools of the world itself don't provide enough opportunity, residents will find their own creative outlets, often in the form of griefing and scams. If the world itself does provide the right kind of outlets, though, much of that creative energy (though not all of it, as Uri would discover soon enough) can be channeled into more positive tasks.

Linden Lab makes money by renting land to its users, and it stands to profit only by increasing its continent's appeal. But what the company leaves out, Ludlow and Wallace note, are developer-created mechanisms for enforceable social standards. That, they say, is what these societies need: a legal system to punish those who harm others.

> Linden Lab does not concentrate on developing tools with which residents can do things like enter into contracts, vote on ordinances, and enforce the regulations that come out of such a process—in other words, tools that could be used to develop governance and society. Nor has the company taken any steps toward making its own "legal" guidelines clear, consistent, and transparent. Instead, the company has focused on adding features like streaming video, clickthroughs to web pages and features like a "heads-up display" that mimics what one might see on the screen of a first-person shooter game.

Where are the leaders? In the minds of some software experts, possibility is all, and permissibility is measured according to the notion that "the physics of the world allow it, so it must be okay." This is an ethic that certainly does not come from the real world, where societies agree to prohibit some very possible things, like murder. It is an ethic born of games: I grab the treasure that was just dropped by a monster you killed because I can. The game doesn't block it, so it must be OK. Players aren't going to be banned for doing it, just yelled at by other players. Other actions that are possible without clearly being harmful can nevertheless be disturbing and controversial. The *Herald* has reported on Second Life residents who role-play as romantically available children and on one who takes "pictures" of what is underneath female avatars' skirts. (Just what *is* underneath female avatars' skirts? Whatever they put there, of course! Blank as Barbie dolls by default, but the user can design an undergarment as elaborate as he or she desires.) This stuff can happen. In some virtual worlds it's not blocked. Should it be?

In a vacuum of authority, what else emerges? Ludlow and Wallace cite examples of "whimsical 'law enforcement.'" A player of World of Warcraft who sought to establish an in-game group that was friendly to lesbian and gay players was informed by the game's creators that she had violated the game's sexual harassment standard—that such a group would engender harassment. After some backlash, the game's makers later backed down. Software companies mix a heavy hand (in the form of player bans) with the lighter touch of negligence (reluctance even to acknowledge some problem-

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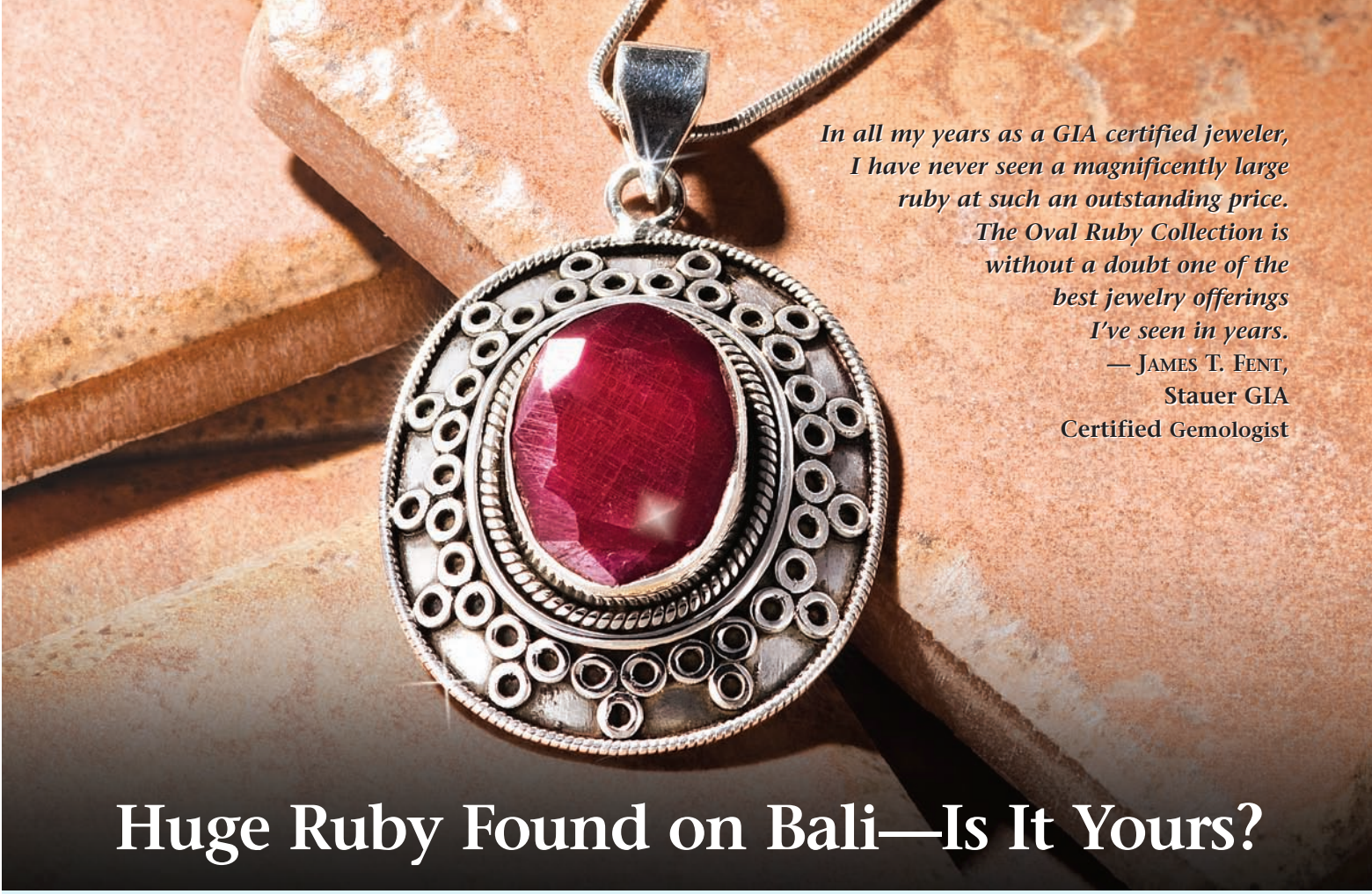

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atic player behavior). The *Herald* has aired the complaints of virtual-world citizens who feel that player-driven enterprises like the Sims Shadow Government are a poor stand-in for true justice, especially when MMO users are already paying developers to live in these virtual worlds. Shouldn't the MMO users assume that what they pay—their taxes for citizenship, if you will—guarantees a rational rule of law? If they kill the monster, should someone else get the prize?

Yet the authors found that citizens of these emerging societies don't always want the kind of equal representation we might expect from good government. In 2005 the *Herald* defended a Second Life citizen who goes by the name Prokofy Neva, who had forcefully, if profanely, used the Second Life message boards to rail against a "Feted Inner Core" of privileged Second Life citizens who were apparently consulted by Linden Lab about changes in the game world. Neva raised a question all too familiar to those of us in the real world: if the authorities consult elite users—those rich few who generate the most in-world commerce—when drafting policy, then how and when will the voice of the rest of the populace be heard? Ludlow and Wallace write:

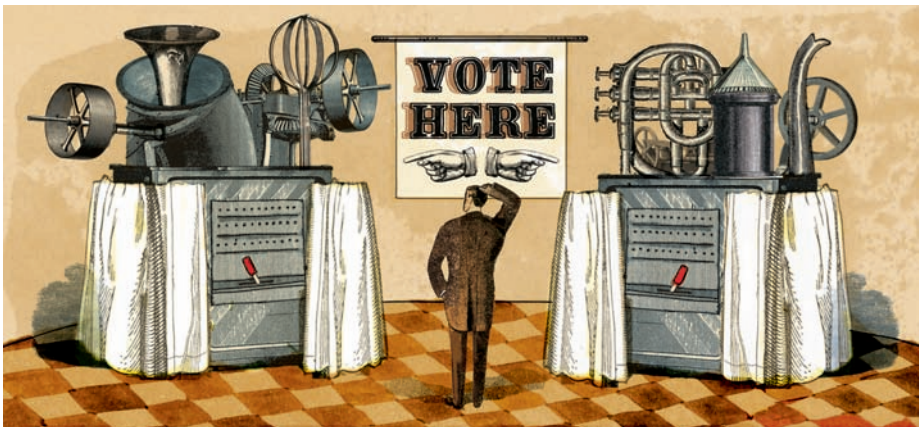
> In the end, all Prokofy was advocating was a kind of campaign finance reform for virtual worlds, a way to include the opinions and concerns of all residents in steering their online environment, rather than giving greater weight to those who generated greater corporate income.

But Neva's incendiary style got him or her banned from official Second Life message boards, and the *Herald* was panned for rushing to the defense. "It seemed that many people, whether they realized it or not, preferred a world in which the unpopular were silenced."

These are both boom times and early times for virtual worlds. From April 10 to May 9, Second Life had more than 823,200 residents log in (a person can have more than one resident, and there is no agreed-upon estimate of how many human users have Second Life accounts). World of Warcraft boasts more than 10 million paid subscribers. Over the last couple of years new online worlds have emerged, including the successful Lord of the Rings Online and, more recently, Tabula Rasa, which has struggled. This fall, Sony will release a shared online world called Home that resembles Second Life and would be free for all users of the company's PlayStation 3 gaming console. These nascent worlds are barely administered by real-world governments, but with real commerce and real rights in play, they do seem to be a realm of concern for real government. Ludlow and Wallace do not directly call for government intervention in the virtual worlds in which they dwell. In fact, they seem more concerned about encouraging citizens of these worlds to resist whatever powers limit their gaming lives. Structure and standards of the new society, they seem to believe, will emerge from users' fight for the rights they want. Ludlow and Wallace write:

> Virtual worlds are currently, for the most part, an entertaining form of interactive art, the province of corporations that naturally wield a profit-driven control over who has access to which features of their software. But [what] happens when making a living in an online environment becomes a viable, not-at-all-outlandish alternative to holding an office job, building a career, or opening a business? Who will govern those societies? Who will say who can come and go, and what they can do there?

If the typical MMO user is a video-game-bred revolutionary, then the playing crowd is certain to become restless. A challenge to the software-designing governments is assured. And the still-emerging virtual world press will be watching—watching a revolution while everyone plays. ■



DOUG CHAYKA

Boxed In

by PETER C. BAKER

Every applicant for US citizenship is required to take a test, and every question on the current test is drawn from the same master list of 100 questions. Many are eminently reasonable ("Who is the President of the United States today?"); others are somewhat trivial ("Who said, 'Give me liberty or give me death'?"). One reads like a discussion question from a fifth-grade history book, the kind with no right answer: "What is the most important right granted to U.S. citizens?"

According to the US Citizenship and Immigration Services, there *is* a right answer—the "right to vote." And though the Constitution contains no affirmative right to vote (only barriers to disenfranchisement on the grounds of factors like race or sex), this is hardly an incoherent response. Suffrage is obviously crucial to democracy. However, the question and its presence on the citizenship test implies more than that—a nation with a deep, practical and well-thought-out commitment to suffrage. But the United States is no such nation. Its deficiencies on this front are complex and bewildering; a more honest and interesting exam question would be, "Do all citizens truly enjoy the right to vote?"

In *Stealing Democracy*, Spencer Overton, a law professor at George Washington University, invokes the metaphor of "the matrix" to convey how the electoral landscape is dominated by a "collection of ever-changing rules and practices employed by various par-

Stealing Democracy
The New Politics of Voter Suppression.
By Spencer Overton.
Norton. 224 pp. Paper $15.95.

Gaming the Vote
Why Elections Aren't Fair (And What We Can Do About It).
By William Poundstone.
Hill & Wang. 352 pp. $25.

Peter C. Baker, a former Nation *intern, is a features writer for the Abu Dhabi* National.

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tisans and bureaucrats." It plays host to trickeries that "often exclude particular voters, enhance the power of certain politicians, and advance specific policy preferences." Overton's fervent hope is that we can remake the matrix "so that it more fairly empowers all voters rather than simply privileging the insiders who know how to manipulate it."

The metaphor (a reference to the sci-fi flick *The Matrix*) is a touch corny, but overall *Stealing Democracy* lends argumentative and evidentiary rigor to liberal conventional wisdom on a host of electoral matters: voter ID laws (bad), multilingual ballots (good), electronic voting machines (bad, so far), enfranchisement of released felons (good, as agreed upon by 80 percent of Americans and every democracy except Armenia). This is, of course, valuable work. Of broader value, however, is the instructive mixture of pessimism, pragmatism and hope with which Overton approaches democratic reform. *Stealing Democracy* is no vague antistate (or antimatrix, or whatever) "power to the people" exhortation. Overton dreams big, but his ultimate recommendations are, given the scope of the problem, quite modest. They inspire without being vague or sweeping—and are all the more compelling for it.

Overton's pessimism stems from his conviction that wherever elections take place, there is a nearly innate "propensity of self-interested politicians to enact rules that benefit themselves instead of the electorate." Of course, there is no universal proof for such a premise, and that's fine. Any intelligent discussion of election systems should proceed as if the premise might be true. Plus, Overton cites a flood of piecemeal evidence suggesting it is true, including California's 2001 bipartisan redistricting scheme, which reduced its number of competitive US House, State Senate and State Assembly seats from forty-four to seventeen (out of 153); the recent redrawing of House districts nationwide such that 98 percent of incumbents retained their seats in 2004; the admission in 2003 by then–Alabama Republican Party chairman Marty Connors that his party is opposed to restoring released felons' voting rights "because felons don't tend to vote Republican." Perhaps this is why elections in 75 percent of democracies are run or supervised by judges or independent officials, and why almost all countries with single-representative voting districts leave redistricting to independent commissions. Overton wishes we would join the democratic world.

He knows, however, that states' rights are the foremost impediment to nationwide electoral reform. In most of the United

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States, duopolistic state legislatures draw voting districts (which invariably become safer for incumbents) and elected partisans oversee elections. States further depute election administration to county, city and town governments. Thus, by Overton's count "there are 4,600 different election systems" in the country. Every factor—funding, staff, machines, oversight, ballot design, recount mechanisms—varies from state to state and county to county. This gives politicians' tendency to game the vote plenty of bureaucratic cover, making it more difficult to notice and fight (which partially explains why and how other countries have instituted reforms while America has not). Without positive enshrinement in the Constitution or vigilant protection by nonpartisan enforcers, "an American's right to vote and have the ballot counted depends on where he or she lives," Overton says.

He sees few benefits to maximizing state and local control. He doesn't put it this way, but "local tailoring" smacks much too strongly of "separate but equal." Obviously, local responsiveness to citizens' needs is a good thing, as is the ability of states to check federal abuse; Overton cautions against centralizing authority in a single election czar. But a state's or district's rights cannot include the right to allow (intentionally or otherwise) some votes to count less than others. Overton would like Congress to recognize this and legislate accordingly.

This is not a radical suggestion, constitutionally speaking: the Elections Clause, Spending Clause and several amendments (namely the Fourteenth, Fifteenth, Nineteenth and Twenty-fourth) variously empower the government to ensure truly democratic representation nationwide. So, at the very least, Congress can and should quadrennially budget the estimated $4 billion needed to underwrite basic fairness in locally administered elections. (That's double what is currently spent by districts and the federal government combined, .24 percent of the Defense Department budget for 2006 and twelve days of fighting in Iraq.) Congress could also require states to legislate minimum standards of fairness (like uniform counting procedures) and accountability (like full election audits) before receiving funds. Congress has asserted such authority before: there's the 1965 Voting Rights Act (VRA), the 1984 Voting Accessibility for the Elderly and Handicapped Act, the 1986 Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act, the 1993 National Voter Registration Act and the 2002 Help America Vote Act.

Unfortunately, as Overton sees it, state and local autonomy remain the sacred cows of American election law (see *Bush v. Gore* and, more recently, *Crawford v. Marion County Election Board*). Thus, *Stealing Democracy* expresses little hope for the sort of federal reform and centralization needed to maximize the equality of voting rights. Instead, Overton pragmatically commits much of his energy to insistently defending the Voting Rights Act as the last and most valuable line of federal defense against rampant disenfranchisement in the states. In his eyes the act is invaluable because it codifies, in Section 5, a compliance requirement (known as "preclearance") designed to prevent state and local governments from sneaking back into exclusionary election practices. Section 5 originally applied to the seven states (Alabama, Alaska, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina and Virginia) and four localities (counties in Arizona, Hawaii, Idaho and North Carolina) with low voter turnouts and the most established histories of excluding voters of color via literacy and interpretation tests. These governments were ordered to submit all proposed changes in election practice to the Justice Department or a panel of three federal judges for review.

State and local autonomy—the sacred cows of election law—are impediments to voting reform.

Since 1965 the VRA has been renewed four times, and Section 5 has been broadened to cover more states, localities and racial groups. The 1970 renewal extended the preclearance requirement to cover several districts in Northern states that had imposed new exclusionary voting tests after 1965, and the 1975 renewal recognized the need to protect Latino, Asian-American, American Indian and Native Alaskan votes. Section 5 review has blocked more than 1,000 discriminatory changes in election law practice. Overton sees it as the most important piece of voting law on the books, and he is perturbed by the increasing popularity of certain attacks on it.

Some politicians affected by Section 5 argue that it is unfair for them to be burdened with the hassle of preclearance as atonement for the long-ago sins of their racist predecessors. "We have repented, and we have reformed," complained Representative Lynn Westmoreland, a Republican from Georgia, during the debate preceding Section 5's 2006 renewal. This objection has little practical force, since any electoral district can apply to "bail out" permanently from the preclearance requirement after complying with the VRA for ten years. Anyway, preclearance is no backbreaking burden: Overton calculates that the average application process costs only $458, much less than the multimillion-dollar discrimination suits Section 5 deters.

Still, Overton fully supports moving past potentially "outdated stereotypes," particularly about the South, when deciding which districts have problems with exclusion and deserve to be covered by Section 5. He proposes eight quantifiable signs that an area deserves federal scrutiny for exclusionary practices, including "Largest racial disparities in voter turnout" and "Most Voting Rights Act objections and claims per capita." However, since these criteria would generally expand Section 5 coverage, they are unlikely to pacify critics like Westmoreland.

A related objection to Section 5 takes contemporary America to be so "colorblind" that fighting racially motivated voter exclusion is a misguided and impractical use of finite resources. This claim is obviously tendentious (to put it politely). Interestingly, it doesn't matter much to Overton whether any partisan officials are actually racists. All that matters is the fact, supported with pages of studies and examples, that "physical appearance, socioeconomic factors such as housing segregation, and distinct voting trends make people of color particularly vulnerable targets for exclusion." Put otherwise: all votes are equally worth protecting, but some remain demonstrably more vulnerable than others. Today's cutthroat and sophisticated political operatives may or may not be "post-race," but they are not colorblind. This is why, in the absence of fundamental federal reform, American suffrage needs Section 5.

Lurking behind the question of suffrage is the equally important question of expressiveness: how well voting captures the true will of a people. Imagine that someday all of Overton's dreams come true: somehow all US citizens are able to register to vote and have their ballots counted. (All right: also imagine away the Electoral College and flawed primary processes.) Could we then stop worrying about the efficacy of voting, supposedly the most basic element of democracy?

We could not, thanks to a fundamental flaw with the very concept of plurality voting. This flaw, described by William Poundstone in *Gaming the Vote* as the "invisible hand misguiding the whole electoral process," is familiar to any casual observer of American politics over the past decade: it is

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the phenomenon of vote-splitting between candidates in a winner-take-all election. In the United States, vote-splitting is manifested most often in the so-called spoiler effect, wherein a third-party candidate takes enough votes from a front-runner to influence an election. Political operatives know all about the spoiler effect and often support hopeless candidates (as Republican operatives supported Ralph Nader in 2004) to siphon votes away from their opponents. Of course, not all third-party candidates are spoilers, and it can be hard to ascertain when spoilage has occurred. Third-party candidates can draw supporters to polls who otherwise wouldn't have voted.

But even without spoilers, plurality voting is defective. A 1948 RAND Corporation report by economist Kenneth Arrow presented mathematical proof that no voting system (including plurality) under which voters rank their preferences in elections among more than two candidates can guarantee logically fair and nonparadoxical results. "Arrow's theorem," explains Poundstone, "says that election outcomes can be decided by quirks of procedure as much as the voters' authentic wishes." The finding (which won Arrow the Nobel Prize in 1972) rattled the American intellectual community by implicitly questioning whether "democracy and individualism might in some deep way be inadequate." Put otherwise: can voting ever accurately express the will of the people?

Most contemporary voting experts concede that all voting methods contain the possibility of paradoxically unfair outcomes but insist that these possibilities can be minimized. Testy and complex back-and-forths rage over which paradoxes are most troubling and which solutions best minimize them. The method with the strongest combination of academic and popular support is called Instant Runoff Voting. In IRV, voters rank multiple candidates (plurality voting limits a voter to ranking just one candidate as "first-place"). If no candidate wins a majority of first-place votes, a virtual runoff is held in which the candidate with the fewest first-place votes is dropped from the ballot, and his or her supporters' second choices are distributed appropriately (any potential spoiler's votes would be transferred to another candidate before spoilage could occur). This continues until a majority winner emerges. Had Florida used IRV in the 2000 presidential election, Al Gore would have won the state and the Electoral College if just 51 percent of Nader supporters placed Gore second. In addition, Nader and other third-party candidates might have scored significantly higher than they did, since IRV seems to eliminate the fear of "wasting your vote" on a probable loser.

IRV should not be confused with the systems of proportional representation at work in most European countries. Poundstone defines proportional representation as "the doctrine that political parties (or other groups) should be represented in a legislature in proportion to their size in the electorate." Some countries facilitate this doctrine with a voting method called the single transferable vote (STV), in which voters rank every candidate, victory requires a certain number of votes and votes for the most unpopular candidates are transferred to those who remain. Transfer formulas vary, and it gets pretty complicated, but the point is: IRV employs the single transferable vote to elect just one candidate instead of a whole legislature. One can logically support proportional representation (as Poundstone and Overton hint that they do) without supporting IRV, and vice versa.

On the face of it, IRV seems like quite a radical reform. It prompts visions of voters striding to the polls to express themselves honestly, elections unfolding unspoiled, vibrant third parties growing in strength and major parties either courting broader constituencies or losing power. This intuitive appeal explains the support IRV has enjoyed from sources as varied as John McCain, Barack Obama, Howard Dean, the Green Party, the Libertarian Party, the Alaskan Republican Party, at least four state Democratic parties, Ralph Nader and *New Yorker* election reform guru Hendrik Hertzberg. It is used by Australia, Ireland, Malta, several professional organizations and a handful of American cities and college campuses.

Poundstone, however, is not convinced that IRV is the solution worth gunning for. He is troubled by its ability to produce a "winner-turns-loser" paradox in which ranking a candidate higher actually makes him or her lose by altering the order in which candidates are eliminated. Poundstone demonstrates this complicated truth by reimagining the 1991 Louisiana gubernatorial race under IRV:

> Thirty-four percent of the voters are for [corrupt Democrat Edwin] Edwards, 32 percent are for [white supremacist David] Duke, and 27 percent are for [moderate Republican Buddy] Roemer.... Since Edwards does not have a majority, the lowest-ranking candidate will be eliminated. That's Roemer. Roemer's votes are transferred to the remaining two candidates, giving Edwards an easy victory over Duke.... Now say that Edwards decided to court the Duke vote just before the election. He gave speeches or ran ads or spread rumors, with the result that a few Duke voters (6 percent of the electorate) switched their votes to Edwards. They ranked Edwards first, ahead of Duke.
>
> The resulting numbers are now 40 percent for Edwards, 26 percent for Duke, and 27 percent for Roemer. See what happens? Duke is now in third place. It's Duke who is eliminated. The runoff is between Edwards and Roemer. Most of Duke's arch-conservatives rank moderate Roemer ahead of liberal Edwards. Therefore, the Duke vote is transferred primarily

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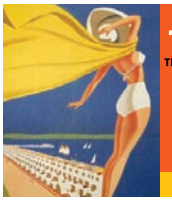

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to Roemer, who beats Edwards by up to 13 points. This outcome is in line with the perception that Roemer would have beaten Edwards in a two-way contest.

For the 6 percent who switched, voting for Edwards instead of Duke caused Edwards to *lose*. This is through-the-looking-glass politics. It is even crazier than the spoiler effect.

IRV has many flaws, including an inherent bias against a moderate running in a field of extremists, but the winner-turns-loser possibility (referred to by voting geeks as a nonmonotonic outcome) is the most unpalatable. It becomes more complicated and more unsettling when combined with the potential for voters to attempt to exploit the paradox by pretending to prefer candidates they really hate. As you might imagine, this can really foul things up.

According to the Center for Voting and Democracy (also known as FairVote), which campaigns heavily for IRV and other electoral reforms (and counts Hertzberg among its board members), winner-turns-loser outcomes are so unlikely that they are not worth worrying about. This is less than reassuring. It is also representative of FairVote's off-putting tendency to act (at least on the subject of IRV) more like a strategically message-centric and obfuscation-prone political campaign than as a project of free inquiry.

A search of the FairVote website for "monotonicity" returns just two unique results ("winner-turns-loser" returns zero). One is a long-archived page explaining that "one statistical study found that if STV elections were to be held through the United Kingdom, a nonmonotonic result would occur less than once a century." The one current page similarly insists that "Potential non-monotonicity…is irrelevant in practice and will not affect voter strategy." To support this claim, FairVote cites one paper in the *Journal of Politics*. I read the paper; its conclusions are highly tentative, and the author writes that his argument "does not establish [IRV's] general superiority." Some open discussion with critics takes place in the comments section of the fairvote.org blog, but cherry-picking and repetitious obscurantism are common there too. As an institution, FairVote is obviously terrified of admitting possible holes in IRV's armor.

FairVote's position is further exemplified by its response to range voting, the method Poundstone ends up tentatively advocating. In range voting, voters don't rank all candidates; they rate them on a scale (such as 1 to 10, with an X for "no opinion"), and the candidate with the highest average rating wins. (Almost all advocates of range voting support requiring a candidate to receive ratings from at least half of voters to win.) By giving up on ranking, range voting appears to avoid any troublingly paradoxical outcomes. FairVote's website notes disparagingly that range voting "could cause the defeat of a candidate who was the favorite candidate of 51% of voters." But this could happen only if another candidate received strong approval from a majority of voters. Rare outcomes like this would be no blow to democracy, only to the arguably antidemocratic practice of victory by minimal coalition.

Nonetheless, range voting has received next to no support in academia or the real world. The Center for Range Voting is little more than the pet project of former Temple University mathematician Warren Smith, without whom range voting would probably be unknown (even to Poundstone). The CRV website is ugly and hard to navigate but populated by sophisticated statistical analyses and thoughtful, often-damning responses to almost every claim made by FairVote and advocates of other voting methods. It feels like the work of a man who isn't out to win but to get a complicated problem right. FairVote would serve democracy well by following that man's lead. Of course, then it might end up having to agree with Poundstone that range voting certainly seems worth trying.

In the midst of pondering how many voters might be expected to vote honestly in a range-voting election, Poundstone (following Smith) offers the following synopsis of the textbook "voter paradox": "If there is a one-in-a-billion chance of your vote's deciding the election, and if it costs you one dollar in lost time or transportation expense to vote, then voting is irrational unless you place the value of your candidate's winning at one billion dollars."

He goes on to speculate briefly as to why "more-or-less rational people" vote anyway. Some, he suggests, have surely been "programmed to feel guilty when they don't vote." For the nonprogrammed, "voting is a symbolic or quasispiritual act. They vote to feel part of the political process, to be connected to something bigger than their own petty concerns. For whatever reason we vote, narrow self-interest plays little role." Here Poundstone misses a valuable chance to point out that rational-choice theory sometimes fails to offer the richest framework for explaining human actions. He realizes that the purpose of voting probably isn't to hope against odds that your vote will tip the race and thereby increase your personal utility, but he doesn't offer any alternative.

A suggestion: voting is a radical act in which democratic free agents join a collective process; in doing so, they simultaneously surrender to that process and find richer definition as free individuals. If this is right, the purpose of Section 5 and voting system reform is to honor this radical surrender by making the relevant collective process more honest, expressive and, well, actually collective.

To the extent that this sounds hokey, I think it's because we are unaccustomed to thinking this way about life in a democracy. Nonetheless, the possibility of doing so remains enticing. I think Spencer Overton realizes this and ultimately draws hope from it. In the conclusion of *Stealing Democracy*, he recalls one of his students asking him, "Why

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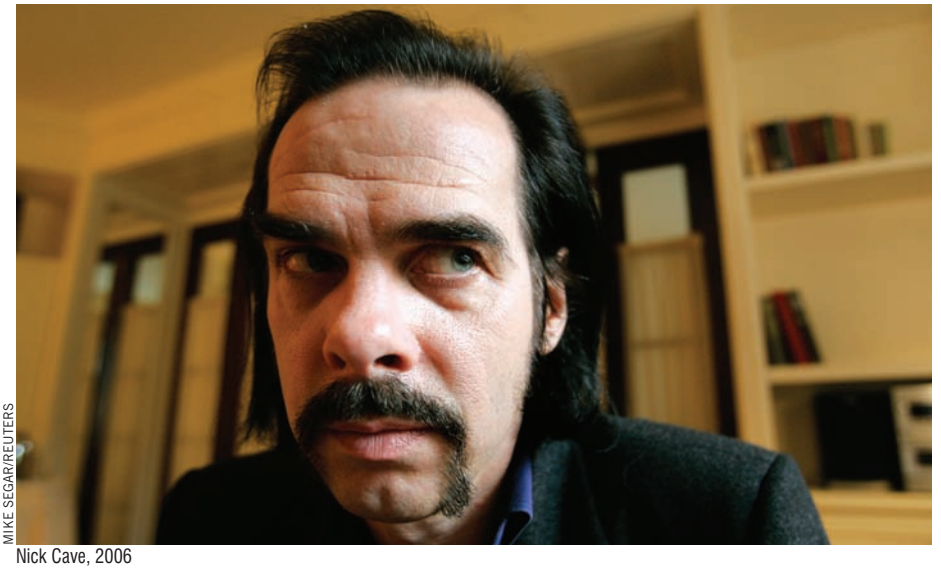
should we care?" Overton responds by sharing the stories of people who, despite their recognition that broad reform is generally impossible without a crisis (the Voting Rights Act was passed only in the outraged aftermath of Selma's "Bloody Sunday") and the fact that "life is overwhelming," devote time to working toward incremental election reform, mostly at the state and local levels. As a result, they feel less "detached, alone, and shortchanged" than before. They realize that living in a democracy means more than having one vote, and they start defining their vote against a lived constellation of commitments. They feel, perhaps for the first time, actively American. ■



MIKE SEGAR/REUTERS

Nick Cave, 2006

A Wink and a Leer

by JESS HARVELL

When Nick Cave debuted in 1978, it was as the sallow, possessed frontman of the Birthday Party, gothic shock troops from Australia with orders to antagonize England's petrified punk circuit. Bad timing. Soon after these brutes arrived in London in the early '80s the national appetite turned to glitzy synth pop, something better suited to the megabucks mood of false optimism that greeted the early days of the Reagan-Thatcher years. The Birthday Party splintered in 1983, leading Cave to form what would become his longest-running band, the Bad Seeds, a group that had little in common with the chipper New Wave of the early MTV era. The Bad Seeds crafted a creepy fusion of American roots music and European experimentalism, as if the Elvis who grew up on country blues had been force-fed astringent Modernist operas during his Army-sponsored vacation in West Germany. And like New World bluesmen and Old World composers, Cave dealt in the kind of romantic myths in which someone invariably winds up on the slab.

Cave's basic intransigence helped him survive the 1980s; albums like *From Her to Eternity* (1984) and *The First Born Is Dead* (1985) found him peeling back the soft belly of the era's pop to get to its darker pleasures, a musical David Lynch with the brimstone tone of Cormac McCarthy. In 2003, after more than a dozen albums studded with coal-black observations on male-female folly, Cave and the Bad Seeds released "Babe, I'm on Fire," fifteen minutes of electrified holy-roller gospel shaking down a deconsecrated church. The song's lyrics are little more than a catalog: Cave spins one jolting description of some strange, supernatural or just plain seedy character after another, like the "demented young lady who's roasting her baby."

Halfway through recounting this rogues' gallery, he slips in a seemingly throwaway jibe about an "old rock and roller with his two-seater stroller," a self-deprecating in-joke at the expense of this father of twins. But rock has always found domesticity somewhat complicated. Embracing the traditional responsibilities that come with age tips over the wobbly (if entertaining) fallacy that you can be an angry young man in perpetuity. Acknowledging that you're growing old in your music while retaining some of rock's youthful energy is a precarious business. This was especially true for someone whose early persona was the *louche* thug winking his way through foul play, as with the infamous gallows humor of the Birthday Party's "Six Inch Gold Blade," in which he stuck the titular knife "in the head of a girl." Even after Cave traded the barbarous comedy of the Birthday Party for the graver, more adult voice of the Bad Seeds, he hardly came off in song like the kind of guy who took the kids shopping at Whole Foods on Saturday morning.

Yet over the past ten years, in interviews and songs, Cave has insisted that he *is* that guy, repeatedly declaring himself to be the kind of hardworking dad you'd call all-American if he wasn't an antipodean expat now residing near the English seaside. Fans wondered if paternity and married life really suited the apocalyptic vibe that animated Cave's early material, and indeed his initial response to his newfound maturity was to forgo the Bad Seeds sound for a series of straight-faced, almost self-serious ballads. Folks who claimed Cave had lost his way, or at least his sense of humor, weren't entirely wrong. Even when listening to a gorgeous love song like "Into My Arms," from *The Boatman's Call* (1997)—which found Cave dallying in the lower reaches of the English pop charts—it was hard not to wistfully recall the man who was once more likely to write a creepy mash note to a circus carny than to bend on one knee and pledge fealty to his lady fair.

Maybe he got fed up with playing slow or decided that reconnecting with his musical id would be cheaper than therapy. Either way, in recent years Cave has slowly yet forcefully renewed his devotion to rock's cheaper thrills while laying bare the liver spots, erectile dysfunction and impotent fears about the ruined planet his offspring stand to inherit. That's his trick: with a wink and a leer, he inflates these middle-aged laments to the same mythical, near ridiculous proportions he once reserved for murderous backwoods boys. And he does it over a racket that offers a respectable third way for those who recognize the potential silliness of a fiftysomething father kicking out the jams while not necessarily wanting to cede the stage to those under 30. Cave's unique, self-lacerating sense of humor helps him avoid the self-parody of rock's sexagenarian cocksmen and middle-aged do-gooders preening across stadium stages.

Even as a young man, Cave lurked in the shadows of the world inhabited by the Jaggers and Stings. Most career underground types his age wind up banished to the world of public radio, a venue where his noisy cheek and unrepentant ribaldry makes him an outcast

Jess Harvell is a writer living in Baltimore.

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among genteel folkies and old punks turned singer-songwriters. But occasionally he manages to make ripples in the mainstream. Last year, he recorded a frequently astonishing little album with a new band of old familiars called Grinderman; their self-titled debut offered ramshackle rock built from little more than bile and feedback. Ragged yet catchier than anything Cave had recently put his name to, it also earned him his best press in ages.

Much of the buzz was thanks to the song "No Pussy Blues," Cave's finest example of how someone on the wrong side of 40 can vent his age-specific woes using rock's pubescent palette of big beats and blaring riffs (even if these riffs happened to be played on an electric bouzouki instead of the expected acoustic guitar or grand piano). This nasty ode to self-abasement opens with the narrator, a desperate, decrepit old codger angling for the sexual favors of a woman half his age, squirming under the hateful flashbulb glare of "all the young and the beautiful/With their questioning eyes." Jilted and flailing, he doesn't shrink from view like any mortal, mortified man might. Instead, he itemizes the humiliations he's put himself through—he starts with agreeably undertaking household chores, only to wind up pathetically playing the tough guy—in the hopes that the woman will relieve his pent-up lust, which is finally uncorked by a speaker-shredding whoop from the backing band.

The rest of *Grinderman* firms up Cave's guiding philosophy: that he can have the brutality and the tenderness, the wit and the knowing stupidity, the sex crimes and the family values—all of 'em, on one record. He offers a freewheeling abundance of moods when most of rock's ballyhooed next big things struggle to articulate just one. On the overstuffed *Abbatoir Blues/The Lyre of Orpheus* (2004), he split his hard and soft sides into an ungainly two-album set; the new *Dig Lazarus Dig!!!*, his latest collaboration with the Bad Seeds, ties the halves together with a big black bow.

Dig isn't as funny or as fierce as *Grinderman*, though it has its moments. The title song revives the biblical character who "never asked to be raised up from the tomb" as a modern-day sad sack named Larry. Stumbling from one big-city misfortune to the next, he has once again landed six feet under by the song's end, but only after a layover in the madhouse. Though not quite a Cave stand-in, Larry is certainly as befuddled as the man in "No Pussy Blues," another aged fellow who must contend with a world where "mirrors became his torturers." The song is quintessential Cave: heavy-handed religious imagery played for laughs and sonic clichés (in this case a lurching glam stomp) pumped up to burlesque, a deep vein of fatalism pulsing underneath.

Cave never was one for overt stabs at politics, but on *Dig*'s best tune, "We Call Upon the Author," he gripes about "the rampant discrimination, mass poverty, Third World debt, infectious disease, global inequality and deepening socioeconomic divisions." It's not quite a turn to protest; the song gets off on societal collapse as much as it bemoans it, offering few solutions for its reversal. While he frets over his and his children's future, he is visited by a friend who brings him a book of "Holocaust poetry" and warns about "the rain," an echo of Bob Dylan's nuclear precipitation and of Travis Bickle waiting for the Almighty to wash society into the gutter. Relax, says the fatalist in Cave; it'll all be over soon. Here's a killer groove while you wait.

Cave's self-lacerating sense of humor helps him avoid being another pretentious old rocker.

Playing the end of the world for thrills may make for bad activism, but it's certainly entertaining. And despite the immense pleasure to be derived from Cave's wordplay, his chosen form of entertainment is rock 'n' roll; *Dig* enthusiastically shreds his poetry with rhythm and noise. "Today's Lesson," "Albert Goes West," "Midnight Man"—these songs lack the small-combo violence and combustibility of *Grinderman*, but their squalls of electric guitar and garage-band hip shake will be welcome to those who found themselves sleeping through the dignified melodies Cave was composing only a few years ago. (It's not all nails on a blackboard; there's also some flute and violin if you prefer a caress to having your ears boxed.)

Nick Cave is hardly the first musician to cross rock's art and pop wires, messily mix sacred and profane or feign teenage kicks to define adulthood. But he'd be sui generis even if popular music were overrun with 50-year-olds in the throes of their second or third creative rejuvenation—unless they too were jackleg biblical scholars cracking filthy jokes about themselves to sleazily erotic punk-blues. If anything, experience has made his music fiercer. Who knows how vicious he'll have gotten by the time he's blowing out sixty candles on his birthday cake? ■

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Tod Papageorge

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I was using a different machine. On the one hand, the project was shaped by my tremendous feelings about the war, which of course weren't unique. But on the other hand, I was intrigued with the notion of going out and photographing these stadiums full of thousands of people and using a wide-angle lens to do it, a lens that could draw in hundreds of people in a single photograph. And with the problem of making coherent pictures out of it. But in a way it's in the service of an idea about the society, also in the service of my own rage at that time, the rage I was feeling. American sport. What is a sport in biology?

A contest?

A mutant. A sport is a biological mutant.

So you see the war in the games?

It's Eliot's objective correlative. Sports, these events, become a kind of arena of material or possibility for shaping into what I feel about the war. Which was, you have to understand, inseparable from what I just generally felt. It's not as if I decided: aha, I'm going to go out and expose America through photographing sporting events. It was nothing like that at all.

What do you think of contemporary photography?

This work, and work of this ilk, came out of a group of photographers who were working in the '60s and the '70s in New York who were all, I think, radicalized by the publication of Robert Frank's *The Americans*. So I guess consistent with all of this work is a kind of negative view of America, a critique of America, done, again, in the interest of nothing but aesthetic or artistic success. In other words, there's no money to be made doing this. There was something very pure about it. As Garry Winogrand once said, it's fit work for a grown man. Or a grown woman.

I understand. It was a different time.

[*Laughter*] That's right. And Diane [Arbus], Diane was working then! But with the success of the galleries, the defining energy became that provided by money. And so what do you see now when you go to a gallery that's selling photography? You see big, huge color prints, most of which really aren't about very much. They're illustrations. [*Points to the cover of his book*] No mind could ever imagine that concatenation of forms. I mean, maybe Velázquez could, but it would take him eight months to paint it out. So I'm not very interested in most photography today, because it is defined by the galleries. It's going to be very interesting to see what's going to happen with the economy going down the tubes.

Why do you shoot in black and white?

It's just what I do. Some poets spend their whole lives writing sonnets.

You've spoken elsewhere about poetry.

Well, photographers and poets, their glory and their shame—that's a quote from Auden, the glory and the shame—is that a poet has to depend upon words, these words. "Cup"—it's so mundane and common—but Robert Frost would say, "fill a cup up/Up to the brim, and even above the brim." The word becomes transformed, ideally. So the curse of the poet is, he has to use all of this *pain quotidien* to make magic. And it's the same with the photographer. He's stuck with the things of the world to transform. What you must understand is that the effort involved here in making these pictures or any that I've made is to make visual poetry. In other words, to use the material of the world as the stuff of transformation into meaning. So whether those facts or those pieces of material bear any kind of conclusive or direct line of connection to the truth is totally irrelevant to me. This has nothing to do with the truth! This is a book of poetry. Whether you respond to it that way is something I can't be concerned with. But that's the ambition. Here. [*Flips to a photo, above, of lovers lying in the trash just outside the Indianapolis 500 racetrack*] This is so bizarre, this couple.

Are they drunk?

They must have been. Or they searched for hours for just the right place to fall to the ground. But when I saw them, I flashed on Luis Buñuel's great Surrealist film *L'Âge d'Or*, where a couple makes love in the mud and various aristocrats are standing around watching them. So it's immediate, but also there was that reference, that resonance. [*Points to a photo of dancers practicing by a row of porta-potties at the Preakness Stakes*] And this—it's Yeats's line, "Love has pitched his mansion in/The place of excrement." ■

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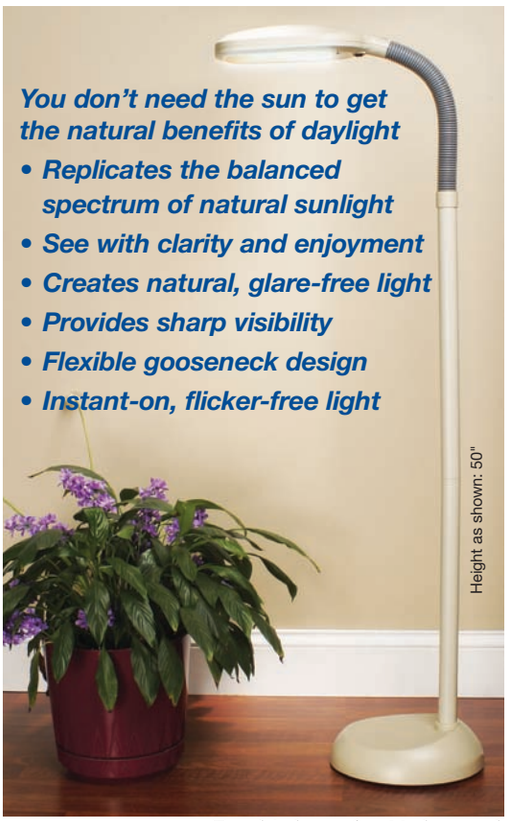
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